

EOIN COLFER

ARTEMIS FOWL

VIKING

'STAY BACK, HUMAN. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DEALING WITH.'

Twelve-year-old Artemis Fowl is a brilliant criminal mastermind. But even Artemis doesn't know what he's taken on when he kidnaps a fairy, Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon Unit. These aren't the fairies of bedtime stories. These fairies are armed and they're dangerous. Artemis thinks he's got them just where he wants them, but then they stop playing by the rules...

ARTEMIS FOWL is the book that caused a sensation months before it was even published. This exciting, original novel has captured the imagination of film companies, publishers, the press and readers all over the world. These are just a few of the reactions the book has had so far:

'Fantastic, exciting and completely original'

'It's fresh, it's funny and I read it in one sitting'

'One of the most original creations in contemporary writing'

'A brilliantly realized parallel world'

'The fairy tale has been redefined'

'Imaginative story, crazy to read, funny characters. It's cool!'

'It's so refreshing to have a different take on the fantasy genre'

'Quite simply out of this world'

EOIN COLFER was born and raised in Wexford, a seaside town in the south-east of Ireland. He began writing plays at an early age, forcing his unfortunate classmates to dress up as marauding Vikings when they would have preferred to be outdoors doing some real marauding.

Browbeaten by constant encouragement from his family, Eoin continued to write as an adult. His first novel, *Benny and Omar*, was an instant best-seller in Ireland.

Eoin has lived in various countries, including Italy, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. His excuse for this is that he was conducting research for his books. He is currently trying to think of a story about Trinidad, so he will have to go there and do a bit of research. Should take about a year.

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For Jackie

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PROLOGUE

How does one describe Artemis Fowl? Various psychiatrists have tried and failed. The main problem is Artemis's own intelligence. He bamboozles every test thrown at him. He has puzzled the greatest medical minds and sent many of them gibbering to their own hospitals.

There is no doubt that Artemis is a child prodigy. But why does someone of such brilliance dedicate himself to criminal activities? This is a question that can be answered by only one person. And he delights in not talking.

Perhaps the best way to create an accurate picture of Artemis is to tell the by now famous account of his first villainous venture. I have put together this report from first-hand interviews with the victims, and as the tale unfolds you will realize that this was not easy.

The story began several years ago at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Artemis Fowl had devised a plan to restore his family's fortune. A plan that could topple civilizations and plunge the planet into a cross-species war.

He was twelve years old at the time ...

CHAPTER 1: THE BOOK

HO Chi Minh City in the summer. Sweltering by anyone's standards. Needless to say, Artemis Fowl would not have been willing to put up with such discomfort if something extremely important had not been at stake. Important to the plan.

Sun did not suit Artemis. He did not look well in it. Long hours indoors in front of the monitor had bleached the glow from his skin. He was white as a vampire and almost as testy in the light of day.

'I hope this isn't another wild-goose chase, Butler,' he said, his voice soft and clipped. 'Especially after Cairo.'

It was a gentle rebuke. They had travelled to Egypt on the word of Butler's informant.

'No, sir. I'm certain this time. Nguyen is a good man.'

'Hmm,' droned Artemis, unconvinced. Passers-by would have been amazed to hear the large Eurasian refer to the boy as sir. This was, after all, the third millennium. But this was no ordinary relationship, and these were no ordinary tourists.

They were sitting outside a kerbside cafe on Dong Khai Street, watching the local teenagers circle the square on mopeds.

Nguyen was late, and the pathetic patch of shade provided by the umbrella was doing little to improve Artemis's mood. But this was just his daily pessimism. Beneath the sulk was a spark of hope. Could this trip actually yield results? Would they find the Book? It was too much to hope for.

A waiter scurried to their table.

'More tea, sirs?' he asked, head bobbing furiously.

Artemis sighed. 'Spare me the theatrics and sit down.'

The waiter turned instinctively to Butler, who was, after all, the adult.

'But, sir, I am the waiter.'

Artemis tapped the table for attention.

'You are wearing handmade loafers, a silk shirt and three gold signet rings. Your English has a tinge of Oxford about it and your nails have the soft sheen of the recently manicured. You are not a waiter. You are our contact, Nguyen Xuan, and you have adopted this pathetic disguise to discreetly check for weaponry.'

Nguyen's shoulders sagged. 'It is true. Amazing.'

'Hardly. A ragged apron does not a waiter make.'

Nguyen sat, pouring some mint tea into a tiny china cup.

'Let me fill you in on the weapons status,' continued Artemis. 'I am unarmed. But Butler here, my ... ah ... butler, has a Sig Sauer in his shoulder holster, two shrike throwing knives in his boots, a derringer two-shot up his sleeve, garrotte wire in his watch and three stun grenades concealed in various pockets. Anything else, Butler?'

'The cosh, sir.'

'Oh yes. A good old ball-bearing cosh stuffed down his shirt.'

Nguyen brought the cup trembling to his lips.

'Don't be alarmed, Mister Xuan,' smiled Artemis. 'The weapons will not be used on you.'

Nguyen didn't seem reassured.

'No,' continued Artemis. 'Butler could kill you a hundred different ways without the use of his armoury. Though I'm sure one would be quite sufficient.'

Nguyen was by now thoroughly spooked. Artemis generally had that effect on people. A pale adolescent speaking with the authority and vocabulary of a powerful adult. Nguyen had heard the name Fowl before - who hadn't in the international underworld? - but he'd assumed he'd be dealing with Artemis Senior, not this boy. Though the word 'boy' hardly seemed to do this gaunt individual justice. And the giant, Butler. It was obvious that he could snap a man's backbone like a twig with those mammoth hands. Nguyen was starting to think that no amount of money was worth another minute in this strange company.

'And now to business,' said Artemis, placing a micro recorder on the table. 'You answered our web advertisement.'

Nguyen nodded, suddenly praying his information was accurate.

'Yes, Mister ... Master Fowl. What you're looking for ... I know where it is.'

'Really? And am I supposed to take your word for this? You could be walking me straight into an ambush. My family is not without enemies.'

Butler snatched a mosquito out of the air beside his employer's ear.

'No, no,' said Nguyen, reaching for his wallet. 'Here, look.'

Artemis studied the Polaroid. He willed his heart to maintain a calm beat. It seemed promising, but anything could be faked these days with a PC and flatbed scanner. The picture showed a hand reaching from layered shadows. A mottled green hand.

'Hmm,' he murmured. 'Explain.'

'This woman. She is a healer, near Tu Do Street. She works in exchange for rice wine. All the time, drunk.'

Artemis nodded. It made sense. The drinking. One of the few consistent facts his research had unearthed. He stood, smoothing the creases from his white polo shirt.

'Very well. Lead on, Mister Nguyen.'

Nguyen wiped the sweat from his stringy moustache.

'Information only. That was the agreement. I don't want any curses on my head.'

Butler expertly gripped the informant behind the neck.

'I'm sorry, Mister Nguyen, but the time when you had a choice in matters is long past.'

Butler steered the protesting Vietnamese to a rented four-wheel drive that was hardly necessary on the flat streets of Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon as the locals still called it, but Artemis preferred to be as insulated from civilians as possible.

The jeep inched forward at a painfully slow rate, made all the more excruciating by the anticipation building in Artemis's chest. He could suppress it no longer. Could they at last be at the end of their quest? After six false alarms across three continents, could this wine-sodden healer be the gold at the end of the rainbow? Artemis almost chuckled. Gold at the end of the rainbow. He'd made a joke. Now there's something that didn't happen every day.

The mopeds parted like fish in a giant shoal. There seemed to be no end to the crowds. Even the alleyways were full to bursting with vendors and hagglers. Cooks dropped fish heads into woks of hissing oil, and urchins threaded their way underfoot, searching for unguarded valuables. Others sat in the shade, wearing out their thumbs on Gameboys.

Nguyen was sweating right through his khaki top. It wasn't the humidity, he was used to that. It was this whole cursed situation. He should've known better than to mix magic and crime. He made a silent promise that if he got out of this, he would change his ways. No more answering shady Internet requests, and certainly no more consorting with the sons of European crime lords.

The jeep could go only so far. Eventually the side streets grew too narrow for the four-wheel drive. Artemis turned to Nguyen. 'It seems we must proceed on foot, Mister Nguyen. Run if you like, but expect a sharp and fatal pain between your shoulder blades.'

Nguyen glanced into Butler's eyes. They were a deep blue, almost black. There was no mercy in those eyes. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I won't run.'

They climbed down from the vehicle. A thousand suspicious eyes followed their progress along the steaming alley. An unfortunate pickpocket attempted to steal Butler's wallet. The manservant broke the man's fingers without looking down. They were given a wide berth after that.

The alley narrowed to a rutted lane. Sewage and drainpipes fed directly on to the muddy surface. Cripples and beggars huddled on rice-mat islands. Most of the residents of this lane had nothing to spare, with the exception of three.

'Well?' demanded Artemis. 'Where is she?'

Nguyen jabbed a finger towards a black triangle beneath a rusted fire escape.

'There. Under there. She never comes out. Even to buy rice spirits, she sends a runner. Now, can I go?'

Artemis didn't bother answering. Instead he picked his way across the puddled lane to the lee of the fire escape. He could discern furtive movements in the shadows.

'Butler, could you hand me the goggles?'

Butler plucked a set of night-vision glasses from his belt and placed them in Artemis's outstretched hand. The focus motor buzzed to suit the light.

Artemis fixed the glasses to his face. Everything became radioactive green. Taking a deep breath, he turned his gaze to the squirming shadows. Something squatted on a raffia mat, shifting uneasily in the almost non-existent light. Artemis fine-tuned the focus. The figure was small, abnormally so, and wrapped in a filthy shawl. Empty spirit jugs were half-buried in the mud around her. One forearm poked from the material. It seemed green. But then, so did everything else.

'Madam,' he said, 'I have a proposition for you.'

The figure's head wobbled sleepily.

'Wine,' she rasped, her voice like nails on a school board. 'Wine, English.'

Artemis smiled. The gift of tongues, aversion to light. Check, check.

'Irish, actually. Now, about my proposition?'

The healer shook a bony finger craftily. 'Wine first. Then talk.'

'Butler?'

The bodyguard reached into a pocket and drew out a half-pint of the finest Irish whiskey. Artemis took the bottle and held it teasingly beyond the shadows. He barely had time to remove his goggles when the claw-like hand darted from the gloom to snatch the whiskey. A mottled green hand. There was no doubt.

Artemis swallowed a triumphant grin.

'Pay our friend, Butler. In full. Remember, Mister Nguyen, this is between us. You don't want Butler to come back, do you?'

'No, no, Master Fowl. My lips are sealed.'

'They had better be. Or Butler will seal them permanently.'

Nguyen skipped off down the alley, so relieved to be alive that he didn't even bother counting the sheaf of US currency. Most unlike him. In any event, it was all there. All twenty thousand dollars. Not bad for half an hour's work.

Artemis turned back to the healer.

'Now, madam, you have something that I want.'

The healer's tongue caught a drop of alcohol at the corner of her mouth.

'Yes, Irish. Sore head. Bad tooth. I heal.'

Artemis replaced the night-vision goggles and squatted to her level.

'I am perfectly healthy, madam, apart from a slight dust-mite allergy, and I don't think even you can do anything about that. No. What I want from you is your Book.'

The hag froze. Bright eyes glinted from beneath the shawl.

'Book?' she said cautiously. 'I don't know about no book. I am healer. You want book, go to library.'

Artemis sighed with exaggerated patience. 'You are no healer. You are a sprite, p'shóg, fairy, ka-dalun. Whichever language you prefer to use. And I want your Book.'

For a long moment the creature said nothing, then she threw back the shawl from her forehead. In the green glow of the night-vision goggles, her features leaped at Artemis like a Hallowe'en mask. The fairy's nose was long and hooked under two slitted golden eyes. Her ears were pointed, and the alcohol addiction had melted her skin like putty.

'If you know about the Book, human,' she said slowly, fighting the numbing effects of the whiskey, 'then you know about the magic I have in my fist. I can kill you with a snap of my fingers!'

Artemis shrugged. 'I think not. Look at you. You are near dead. The rice wine has dulled your senses. Reduced to healing warts. Pathetic. I am here to save you, in return for the Book.'

'What could a human want with our Book?'

'That is no concern of yours. All you need to know are your options.'

The sprite's pointed ears quivered. Options?

'One, you refuse to give us the Book and we go home, leaving you to rot in this sewer.'

'Yes,' said the fairy. 'I choose this option.'

'Ah no. Don't be so eager. If we leave without the Book, you will be dead in a day.'

'A day! A day!' The healer laughed. 'I will outlive you by a century. Even fairies tethered to the human realm can survive the ages.'

'Not with half a pint of holy water inside them,' said Artemis, tapping the now empty whiskey bottle.

The fairy blanched, then screamed, a high keening horrible sound.

'Holy water! You have murdered me, human.'

'True,' admitted Artemis. 'It should start to burn any minute now.'

The fairy poked her stomach tentatively. 'The second option?'

'Listening now, are we? Very well then. Option two. You give me the Book for thirty minutes only. Then I return your magic to you.'

The sprite's jaw dropped. 'Return my magic? Not possible.'

'Oh but it is. I have in my possession two ampoules.'

One, a vial of spring water from the fairy well sixty metres below the ring of Tara - possibly the most magical place on earth. This will counteract the holy water.'

'And the other?'

'The other is a little shot of man-made magic. A virus that feeds on alcohol, mixed with a growth reagent. It will flush every drop of rice wine from your body, remove the dependence and even bolster your failing liver. It'll be messy, but after a day you'll be zipping around as though you were a thousand years old again.'

The sprite licked her lips. To be able to rejoin the People? Tempting.

'How do I know to trust you, human? You have tricked me once already.'

'Good point. Here's the deal. I give you the water on faith. Then, after I've had a look at the Book, you get the booster. Take it or leave it.'

The fairy considered. The pain was already curling around her abdomen. She thrust out her wrist.

'I take it.'

'I thought you might. Butler?'

The giant manservant unwrapped a soft Velcroed case containing a syringe gun and two vials. He loaded the clear one, shooting it into the sprite's clammy arm. The fairy stiffened momentarily, and then relaxed.

'Strong magic,' she breathed.

'Yes. But not as strong as your own will be when I give you the second injection. Now, the Book.'

The sprite reached into the folds of her filthy robe, rummaging for an age. Artemis held his breath. This was it. Soon the Fowls would be great again. A new empire would rise, with Artemis Fowl the Second at its head.

The fairy woman withdrew a closed fist.

'No use to you anyway. Written in the old tongue.'

Artemis nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

She opened her knobby fingers. Lying in her palm was a tiny golden volume the size of a matchbox.

'Here, human. Thirty of your minutes. No more.'

Butler took the tiny tome reverentially. The bodyguard activated a compact digital camera and began photographing each wafer-thin page of the Book. The process took several minutes. When he was finished, the entire volume was stored on the camera's chip. Artemis preferred not to take chances with information. Airport security equipment had been known to wipe many a vital disk. So he instructed his aide to transfer the file to his portable phone and from there e-mail it to Fowl Manor in Dublin. Before the thirty minutes were up, the file containing every symbol in the Fairy Book was sitting safely in the Fowl server.

Artemis returned the tiny volume to its owner.

'Nice doing business with you.'

The sprite lurched to her knees. 'The other potion, human?'

Artemis smiled. 'Oh yes, the restoring booster. I suppose I did promise.'

'Yes. Human promised.'

'Very well. But before we administer it, I must warn you that purging is not pleasant. You're not going to enjoy this one bit.'

The fairy gestured around her at the squalid filth. 'You think I enjoy this? I want to fly again.'

Butler loaded the second vial, shooting this one straight into the carotid artery.

The sprite immediately collapsed on the mat, her entire frame quivering violently.

'Time to leave,' commented Artemis. 'A hundred years of alcohol leaving a body by any means possible is not a pretty sight.'

The Butlers had been serving the Fowls for centuries. It had always been the way. Indeed there were several eminent linguists of the opinion that this was how the noun originated. The first record of this unusual arrangement was when Virgil Butler had been contracted as servant, bodyguard and cook to Lord Hugo de Pole for one of the first great Norman crusades.

At the age often, Butler children were sent to a private training centre in Israel, where they were taught the specialized skills necessary to guard the latest in the Fowl line. These skills included cordon bleu cooking, marksmanship, a customized blend of martial arts, emergency medicine and information technology. If, at the end of their training, there was not a Fowl to guard, then the Butlers were eagerly snapped up as bodyguards for various royal personages, generally in Monaco or Saudi Arabia.

Once a Fowl and a Butler were put together, they were paired for life. It was a demanding job, and lonely, but the rewards were handsome if you survived to enjoy them. If not, then your family received a six-figure settlement plus a monthly pension.

The current Butler had been guarding young Master Artemis for twelve years, since the moment of his birth. And, though they adhered to the age-old formalities, they were much more than master and servant. Artemis was the closest thing Butler had to a friend, and Butler was the closest Artemis had to a father, albeit one who obeyed orders.

Butler held his tongue until they were aboard the Heathrow connection from Bangkok, then he had to ask.

'Artemis?'

Artemis looked up from the screen of his PowerBook. He was getting a head start on the translation.

'Yes?'

'The sprite. Why didn't we simply keep the Book and leave her to die?'

'A corpse is evidence, Butler. My way, the People will have no reason to be suspicious.'

'But the sprite?'

'I hardly think she will confess to showing humans the Book. In any case, I mixed a slight amnesiac into her second injection. When she finally wakes up, the last week will be a blur.'

Butler nodded appreciatively. Always two steps ahead, that was Master Artemis. People said he was a chip off the old block. They were wrong. Master Artemis was a brand-new block, the likes of which had never been seen before.

Doubts assuaged, Butler returned to his copy of *Guns and Ammo*, leaving his employer to unravel the secrets of the universe.

CHAPTER 2: TRANSLATION

BY now, you must have guessed just how far Artemis Fowl was prepared to go in order to achieve his goal. But what exactly was this goal? What outlandish scheme would involve the blackmailing of an alcohol-addicted sprite? The answer was gold.

Artemis's search had begun two years previously when he first became interested in surfing the Internet. He quickly found the more arcane sites: alien abduction, UFO sightings and the supernatural. But most specifically the existence of the People.

Trawling through gigabytes of data, he found hundreds of references to fairies from nearly every country in the world. Each civilization had its own term for the People, but they were undoubtedly members of the same hidden family. Several stories mentioned a Book carried by each fairy. It was their Bible, containing, as it allegedly did, the history of their race and the commandments that governed their extended lives. Of course, this Book was written in Gnommish, the fairy text, and would be of no use to any human.

Artemis believed that with today's technology the Book could be translated. And with this translation you could begin to exploit a whole new group of creatures.

Know thine enemy was Artemis's motto, so he immersed himself in the lore of the People until he had compiled a huge database on their characteristics. But it wasn't enough. So Artemis put out a call on the Web: Irish businessman will pay large amount of US dollars to meet a fairy, sprite, leprechaun, pixie. The responses had been mostly fraudulent, but Ho Chi Minh City had paid off.

Artemis was perhaps the only person alive who could take full advantage of his recent acquisition. He still retained a childlike belief in magic, tempered by an adult determination to exploit it. If there was anybody capable of relieving the fairies of some of their magical gold, it was Artemis Fowl the Second.

It was early morning before they reached Fowl Manor. Artemis was anxious to bring up the file on his computer, but first he decided to call in on Mother.

Angeline Fowl was bedridden. She had been since her husband's disappearance. Nervous tension, the physicians said. Nothing for it but rest and sleeping pills. That was almost a year ago.

Butler's little sister, Juliet, was sitting at the foot of the stairs. Her gaze was boring a hole in the wall. Even the glitter mascara couldn't soften her expression. Artemis had seen that look already, just before Juliet had suplexed a particularly cheeky pizza boy. The suplex, Artemis gathered, was a wrestling move. An unusual obsession for a teenage girl. But then again she was, after all, a Butler.

'Problems, Juliet?'

Juliet straightened hurriedly. 'My own fault, Artemis. Apparently I left a gap in the curtains. Mrs Fowl couldn't sleep.'

'Hmm,' muttered Artemis, scaling the oak staircase slowly.

He worried about his mother's condition. She hadn't seen the light of day in a long time now. Then again, should she miraculously recover, emerging revitalized from her bedchamber, it would signal the end of Artemis's own extraordinary freedom. It would be back off to school, and no more spearheading criminal enterprises for you, my lad.

He knocked gently on the arched double doors.

'Mother? Are you awake?'

Something smashed against the other side of the door. It sounded expensive.

'Of course I'm awake! How can I sleep in this blinding glare?'

Artemis ventured inside. An antique four-poster bed threw shadowy spires in the darkness, and a pale sliver of light poked through a gap in the velvet curtains. Angeline Fowl sat hunched on the bed, her pale limbs glowing white in the gloom.

'Artemis, darling, where have you been?'

Artemis sighed. She recognized him. That was a good sign.

'School trip, Mother. Skiing in Austria.'

'Ah, skiing,' crooned Angeline. 'How I miss it. Maybe when your father returns.'

Artemis felt a lump in his throat. Most uncharacteristic.

'Yes. Perhaps when Father returns.'

'Darling, could you close those wretched curtains. The light is intolerable.'

'Of course, Mother.'

Artemis felt his way across the room, wary of the low-level clothes chests scattered about the floor. Finally his fingers curled around the velvet drapes. For a moment he was tempted to throw them wide open, then he sighed and closed the gap.

'Thank you, darling. By the way, we really have to get rid of that maid. She is good for absolutely nothing.'

Artemis held his tongue. Juliet had been a hardworking and loyal member of the Fowl household for the past three years. Time to use Mother's absent-mindedness to his advantage.

'You're right of course, Mother. I've been meaning to do it for some time. Butler has a sister I believe would be perfect for the position. I think I've mentioned her. Juliet?'

Angeline frowned. 'Juliet? Yes, the name does seem familiar. Well, anyone would be better than that silly girl we have now. When can she start?'

'Straight away. I'll have Butler fetch her from the lodge.'

'You're a good boy, Artemis. Now give Mummy a hug.'

Artemis stepped into the shadowy folds of his mother's robe. She smelled perfumed, like petals in water. But her arms were cold and weak.

'Oh, darling,' she whispered, and the sound sent goosebumps popping down Artemis's neck. 'I hear things. At night. They crawl along the pillows and into my ears.'

Artemis felt that lump in his throat again.

'Perhaps we should open the curtains, Mother.'

'No,' his mother sobbed, releasing him from her grasp. 'No. Because then I could see them too.'

'Mother, please.'

But it was no use. Angeline was gone. She crawled to the far corner of the bed, pulling the quilt under her chin.

'Send the new girl.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Send her with cucumber slices and water.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Angeline glared at him with crafty eyes. 'And stop calling me Mother. I don't know who you are, but you're certainly not my little Arty.'

Artemis blinked back a few rebellious tears. 'Of course. Sorry, Moth - Sorry.'

'Hmm. Don't come back here again, or I'll have my husband take care of you. He's a very important man, you know.'

'Very well, Mrs Fowl. This is the last you'll see of me.'

'It had better be.' Angeline froze suddenly. 'Do you hear them?'

Artemis shook his head. 'No. I don't hear any -'

'They're coming for me. They're everywhere.' Angeline dived for cover beneath the bedclothes.

Artemis could still hear her terrified sobs as he descended the marble staircase.

The Book was proving far more stubborn than Artemis had anticipated. It seemed to be almost actively resisting him. No matter which program he ran it through, the computer came up blank.

Artemis hard-copied every page, tacking them to the walls of his study. Sometimes it helped to have things on paper. The script was like nothing he'd seen before, and yet it was strangely familiar. Obviously a mixture of symbolic and character-based language, the text meandered around the page in no apparent order.

What the program needed was some frame of reference, some central point on which to build. He separated all the characters and ran comparisons with English, Chinese, Greek, Arabic and Cyrillic texts, even with Ogham. Nothing.

Moody with frustration, Artemis sent Juliet scurrying when she interrupted with sandwiches, and moved on to symbols. The most frequently recurring pictogram was a small male figure. Male, he presumed, though with the limited knowledge of the fairy anatomy he supposed it could be female. A thought struck him. Artemis opened the ancient languages file on his Power Translator and selected Egyptian.

At last. A hit. The male symbol was remarkably similar to the Anubis god representation on Tutankhamen's inner-chamber hieroglyphics. This was consistent with his other findings. The first written human stories were about fairies, suggesting that their civilization predated man's own. It would seem that the Egyptians had simply adapted an existing scripture to suit their needs.

There were other resemblances. But the characters were just dissimilar enough to slip through the computer's net. This would have to be done manually. Each Gnommish figure had to be enlarged, printed and then compared with the hieroglyphs.

Artemis felt the excitement of success thumping inside his ribcage. Almost every fairy pictogram or letter had an Egyptian counterpart. Most were universal, such as the sun or birds. But some seemed exclusively supernatural and had to be tailored to fit. The Anubis figure, for example, would make no sense as a dog god, so Artemis altered it to read king of the fairies.

By midnight, Artemis had successfully fed his findings into the Macintosh. All he had to do now was press 'Decode'. He did so. What emerged was a long, intricate string of meaningless gibberish.

A normal child would have abandoned the task long since. The average adult would probably have been reduced to slapping the keyboard. But not Artemis. This book was testing him and he would not allow it to win.

The letters were right, he was certain of it. It was just the order that was wrong. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Artemis glared at the pages again. Each segment was bordered by a solid line. This could represent paragraphs or chapters, but they were not meant to be read in the usual left to right, top to bottom fashion.

Artemis experimented. He tried the Arabic right to left and the Chinese columns. Nothing worked. Then he noticed that each page had one thing in common - a central section. The other pictograms were arranged around this pivotal area. So a central starting point perhaps. But where to go from there? Artemis scanned the pages for some other common factor. After several minutes he found it. There was on each page a tiny spearhead in the corner of one section. Could this be an arrow? A direction? Go this way? So the theory would be start in the middle, then follow the arrow, reading in spirals.

The computer program wasn't built to handle something like this, so Artemis had to improvise. With a craft knife and ruler, he dissected the first page of the Book and reassembled it in the traditional Western languages order - left to right, parallel rows. Then he rescanned the page and fed it through the modified Egyptian translator.

The computer hummed and whirred, converting all the information to binary. Several times it stopped to ask for confirmation of a character or symbol. This happened less and less as the machine learned the new language. Eventually two words flashed on the screen: File converted.

Fingers shaking from exhaustion and excitement, Artemis clicked 'Print'. A single page scrolled from the LaserWriter. It was in English now. Yes, there were mistakes, some fine-tuning needed, but it was perfectly legible and, more importantly, perfectly understandable.

Fully aware that he was probably the first human in several thousand years to decode the magical words, Artemis switched on his desk light and began to read.

The Booke of the People.
Being instructions to our magicks
and life rules

Carry me always, carry me well.
I am thy teacher of herb and spell.
I am thy link to power arcane.
Forget me and thy magick shall wane.

Ten times ten commandments there be.
They will answer every mystery.
Cures, curses, alchemy.
These secrets shall be thine, through me.

But, Fairy, remember this above all.
I am not for those in mud that crawl.
And forever doomed shall be the one,
Who betrays my secrets one by one.

Artemis could hear the blood pumping in his ears. He had them. They would be as ants beneath his feet. Their every secret would be laid bare by technology. Suddenly the exhaustion claimed him and he sank back in his chair. There was so much yet to complete. Forty-three pages to be translated for a start.

He pressed the intercom button that linked him to speakers all over the house. 'Butler. Get Juliet and come up here. There are some jigsaws I need you to assemble.'

Perhaps a little family history would be useful at this point.

The Fowls were, indeed, legendary criminals. For generations they had skirmished on the wrong side of the law, hoarding enough funds to become legitimate. Of course, once they were legitimate they found it not to their liking and returned almost immediately to crime.

It was Artemis the First, our subject's father, who had thrown the family fortune into jeopardy. With the break-up of communist Russia, Artemis Senior had decided to invest a huge chunk of the Fowl fortune in establishing new shipping lines to the vast continent. New consumers, he reasoned, would need new consumer goods. The Russian Mafia did not take too kindly to a Westerner muscling in on their market and so decided to send a little message. This message took the form of a stolen Stinger missile launched at the Fowl Star on her way past Murmansk. Artemis Senior was on board the ship, along with Butler's uncle and 250,000 cans of cola. It was quite an explosion.

The Fowls were not left destitute, far from it. But billionaire status was no longer theirs. Artemis the Second vowed to remedy this. He would restore the family fortune. And he would do it in his own unique fashion.

Once the Book was translated, Artemis could begin planning in earnest. He already knew what the ultimate goal was, now he could figure out how to achieve it.

Gold, of course, was the objective. The acquisition of gold. It seemed that the People were almost as fond of the precious metal as humans. Each fairy had its own cache, but not for much longer if Artemis had his way. There would be at least one of the fairy folk wandering around with empty pockets by the time he'd finished.

After eighteen solid hours of sleep and a light continental breakfast, Artemis climbed to the study that he had inherited from his father. It was a traditional enough room - dark oak and floor-to-ceiling shelving - but Artemis had jammed it with the latest computer technology. A series of networked AppleMacs whirred from various corners of the room. One was running CNN's web site through a DAT projector, throwing oversized current-affairs images against the back wall.

Butler was there already, firing up the hard drives.

'Shut them all down, except the Book. I need quiet for this.'

The manservant started. The CNN site had been running for almost a year. Artemis was convinced that news of his father's rescue would come from there. Shutting it down meant that he was finally letting go.

'All of them?'

Artemis glanced at the back wall for a moment. 'Yes,' he said finally. 'All of them.'

Butler took the liberty of patting his employer gently on the shoulder, just once, before returning to work. Artemis cracked his knuckles. Time to do what he did best - plot dastardly acts.

CHAPTER 3: HOLLY

HOLLY Short was lying in bed having a silent fume. Nothing unusual about this. Leprechauns in general were not known for their geniality. But Holly was in an exceptionally bad mood, even for a fairy. Technically she was an elf, fairy being a general term. She was a leprechaun too, but that was just a job.

Perhaps a description would be more helpful than a lecture on fairy genealogy. Holly Short had nut-brown skin, cropped auburn hair and hazel eyes. Her nose had a hook and her mouth was plump and cherubic, which was appropriate considering that Cupid was her greatgrandfather. Her mother was a European elf with a fiery temper and a willowy figure. Holly, too, had a slim frame, with long tapered fingers perfect for wrapping around a buzz baton. Her ears, of course, were pointed. At exactly one metre in height, Holly was only a centimetre below the fairy average, but even one centimetre can make an awful lot of difference when you don't have many to spare.

Commander Root was the cause of Holly's distress. Root had been on Holly's case since day one. The commander had decided to take offence at the fact that the first female officer in Recon's history had been assigned to his squad. Recon was a notoriously dangerous posting with a high fatality rate, and Root didn't think it was any place for a girlie. Well, he was just going to have to get used to the idea, because Holly Short had no intention of quitting for him or anybody else.

Though she'd never admit it, another possible cause for Holly's irritability was the Ritual. She'd been meaning to perform it for several moons now, but somehow there just never seemed to be time. And if Root found out she was running low on magic, she'd be transferred to Traffic for sure.

Holly rolled off her futon and stumbled into the shower. That was one advantage of living near the earth's core - the water was always hot. No natural light, of course, but that was a small price to pay for privacy. Underground. The last human-free zone. There was nothing like coming home after a long day on the job, switching off your shield and sinking into a bubbling slime pool. Bliss.

The fairy suited up, zipping the dull-green jumpsuit up to her chin and strapping on her helmet. LEPrecon uniforms were smart these days. Not like that top-o'-the-morning costume the force had had to wear back in the old days. Buckled shoes and knickerbockers! Honestly. No wonder leprechauns were such ridiculous figures in human folklore. Still, probably better that way. If the Mud People knew that the word 'leprechaun' actually originated from LEPrecon, an elite branch of the Lower Elements Police, they'd probably take steps to stamp them out. Better to stay inconspicuous and let the humans have their stereotypes.

With the moon already rising on the surface, there was no time for a proper breakfast. Holly grabbed the remains of a nettle smoothie from the cooler and drank it in the tunnels. As usual there was chaos in the main thoroughfare. Airborne sprites jammed the avenue like stones in a bottle. The gnomes weren't helping either, lumbering along with their big swinging behinds blocking two lanes. Swear toads infested every damp patch, cursing like sailors. That particular breed began as a joke but had multiplied into an epidemic. Someone lost their wand over that one.

Holly battled through the crowds to the police station. There was already a riot outside Spud's Spud Emporium. LEP Corporal Newt was trying to sort it out. Good luck to him. Nightmare. At least Holly got the chance to work above ground.

The LEP station doors were crammed with protesters. The goblin/dwarf turf war had flared up again, and every morning hordes of angry parents showed up demanding the release of their innocent offspring. Holly snorted. If there actually was an innocent goblin, Holly Short had yet to meet him. They were clogging up the cells now, howling gang chants and hurling fireballs at each other.

Holly shouldered her way into the throng. 'Coming through,' she grunted. 'Police business.'

They were on her like flies on a stink-worm.

'My Grumpo is innocent!'

'Police brutality!'

'Officer, could you take my baby in his blanky? He can't sleep without it.'

Holly set her visor to reflect and ignored them all. Once upon a time the uniform would have earned you some respect. Not any more. Now you were a target. 'Excuse me, Officer, but I seem to have misplaced my jar of warts.' 'Pardon me, young elf, but my cat's climbed a stalactite.' Or, 'If you have a minute, Captain, could you tell me how to get to the Fountain of Youth?' Holly shuddered. Tourists. She had troubles of her own. More than she knew, as she was about to find out.

In the station lobby, a kleptomaniac dwarf was busy picking the pockets of everyone else in the booking line, including the officer he was handcuffed to. Holly gave him a swipe in the backside with her buzz baton. The electric charge singed the seat of his leather trousers.

'Whatcha doing there, Mulch?'

Mulch started, contraband dropping from his sleeves.

'Officer Short,' he whined, his face a mask of regret, 'I can't help myself. It's my nature.'

'I know that, Mulch. And it's our nature to throw you in a cell for a couple of centuries.'

She winked at the dwarf's arresting officer.

'Nice to see you're staying alert.'

The elf blushed, kneeling to pick up his wallet and badge.

Holly forged past Root's office, hoping she would make it to her cubicle before ...

'SHORT! GET IN HERE!'

Holly sighed. Ah well. Here we go again.

Stowing her helmet under her arm, Holly smoothed the creases from her uniform and stepped into Commander Root's office.

Root's face was purple with rage. This was more or less his general state of existence, a fact that had earned him the nickname 'Beetroot'. There was an office pool running on how long he had before his heart exploded. The smart money was on half a century, at the outside.

Commander Root was tapping the moonometer on his wrist. 'Well?' he demanded. 'What time do you call this?'

Holly could feel her own face colouring. She was barely a minute late. There were at least a dozen officers on this shift who hadn't even reported in yet. But Root always singled her out for persecution.

'The thoroughfare,' she mumbled lamely. 'There were four lanes down.'

'Don't insult me with your excuses!' roared the commander. 'You know what the city centre is like! Get up a few minutes earlier!'

It was true, she did know what Haven was like. Holly Short was a city elf born and bred. Since the humans began experimenting with mineral drilling, more and more fairies had been driven out of the shallow forts and into the depth and security of Haven City. The metropolis was overcrowded and under-serviced. And now there was a lobby to allow automobiles in the pedestrianized city centre. As if the place wasn't smelly enough already with all those country gnomes lumbering around the place.

Root was right. She should get up a bit earlier. But she wouldn't. Not until everybody else was forced to.

'I know what you're thinking,' said Root. 'Why am I picking on you every day? Why don't I ever bawl out those other layabouts?'

Holly said nothing, but agreement was written all over her face.

'I'll tell you why, shall I?'

Holly risked a nod.

'It's because you're a girl.'

Holly felt her fingers curl into fists. She knew it!

'But not for the reasons you think,' continued Root. 'You are the first girl in Recon. Ever. You are a test case. A beacon. There are a million fairies out there watching your every move. There are a lot of hopes riding on you. But there is a lot of prejudice against you too. The future of law enforcement is in your hands. And at the moment, I'd say it was a little heavy.'

Holly blinked. Root had never said anything like this before. Usually it was just 'Fix your helmet', 'Stand up straight', blah blah blah.

'You have to be the best you can be, Short, and that has to be better than anybody else.' Root sighed, sinking into his swivel chair. 'I don't know, Holly. Ever since that Hamburg affair.'

Holly winced. The Hamburg affair had been a total disaster. One of her perps had skipped out to the surface and tried to bargain with the Mud People for asylum. Root had to stop time, call in the Retrieval Squad, and do four memory wipes. A lot of police time wasted. All her fault.

The commander took a form from his desk. 'It's no use. I've made up my mind. I'm putting you on Traffic and bringing in Corporal Frond.'

'Frond!' exploded Holly. 'She's a bimbo. An airhead. You can't make her the test case!'

Root's face turned an even deeper shade of purple.

'I can and I will. Why shouldn't I? You have never given me your best ... Either that or your best just isn't good enough. Sorry, Short, you had your chance ...'

The commander turned back to his paperwork. The meeting was over. Holly could only stand there, aghast. She'd blown it. The best career opportunity she was ever likely to get and she'd tossed it in the gutter. One mistake and her future was past. It wasn't fair. Holly felt an uncharacteristic anger take hold of her, but she swallowed it. This was no time to lose her temper.

'Commander Root, sir. I feel I deserve one more chance.'

Root didn't even look up from the paperwork. 'And why's that?'

Holly took a deep breath. 'Because of my record, sir. It speaks for itself, apart from the Hamburg thing. Ten successful recons. Not a single memory wipe or time-stop, apart from ...'

'The Hamburg thing,' completed Root.

Holly took a chance. 'If I were a male - one of your precious sprites - we wouldn't even be having this conversation.'

Root glanced up sharply. 'Now, just a minute, Captain Short -'

He was interrupted by the bleeping of one of the phones on his desk. Then two, then three. A giant viewscreen crackled into life on the wall behind him.

Root jabbed the speaker button, putting all the callers on conference.

'Yes?'

'We've got a runner.'

Root nodded. 'Anything on Scopes?'

Scopes was the shop name for the shrouded trackers attached to American communications satellites.

'Yep,' said caller two. 'Big blip in Europe. Southern Italy. No shield.'

Root cursed. An unshielded fairy could be seen by mortal eyes. That wasn't so bad if the perp was humanoid.

'Classification?'

'Bad news, Commander,' said the third caller. 'We got us a rogue troll.'

Root rubbed his eyes. Why did these things always happen on his watch? Holly could understand his frustration. Trolls were the meanest of the deep-tunnel creatures. They wandered the labyrinth, preying on anything unlucky enough to cross their path. Their tiny brains had no room for rules or restraint. Occasionally one found its way into the shaft of a pressure elevator. Usually the concentrated air current fried them, but sometimes one survived and was blasted to the surface. Driven crazy by pain and even the tiniest amount of light, they would generally proceed to destroy everything in their path.

Root shook his head rapidly, recovering himself.

'OK, Captain Short. Looks like you get your chance. You're running hot, I take it?'

'Yes, sir,' lied Holly, all too aware that Root would suspend her immediately if he knew she'd neglected the Ritual.

'Good. Then sign yourself out a side-arm and proceed to the target area.'

Holly glanced at the viewscreen. Scopes were sending high-res shots of an Italian fortified town. A red dot was moving rapidly through the countryside towards the human population.

'Do a thorough reconnaissance and report in. Do not attempt a retrieval. Is that understood?'

'Yessir.'

'We lost six men to troll attacks last quarter. Six men. That was below ground, in familiar territory.'

'I understand, sir.'

Root pursed his lips doubtfully.

'Do you understand, Short? Do you really?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Have you ever seen what a troll can do to flesh and bone?'

'No, sir. Not up close.'

'Good. Let's not make today your first time.'

'Understood.'

Root glared at her. 'I don't know why it is, Captain Short, but whenever you start agreeing with me, I get decidedly nervous.'

Root was right to be nervous. If he'd known how this straightforward Recon assignment was going to turn out, he would probably have retired there and then. Tonight, history was going to be made. And it wasn't the discovery-of-radium, first-man-on-the-moon happy kind of history. It was the Spanish-Inquisition, here-comes-the-Hindenburg bad kind of history. Bad for humans and fairies. Bad for everyone.

Holly proceeded directly to the chutes. Her normally chatty mouth was a grim slash of determination. One chance, that was it. She would allow nothing to break her concentration.

There was the usual queue of holiday visa hopefuls stretching to the corner of Elevator Plaza, but Holly bypassed it by waving her badge at the waiting line. A truculent gnome refused to yield.

'How come you LEP guys get to go topside? What's so special about you?'

Holly breathed deeply through her nose. Courtesy at all times. 'Police business, sir. Now if you could just excuse me.'

The gnome scratched his massive behind. 'I hear you LEP guys make up your police business just to get a look at some moonlight. That's what I hear.'

Holly attempted an amused smile. What actually formed on her lips resembled a lemon-sucking grimace.

'Whoever told you that is an idiot ... sir. Recon venture only above ground when absolutely necessary.'

The gnome frowned. Obviously he had made up the rumour himself and suspected that Holly might have just called him an idiot. By the time he'd figured it out, she had skipped through the double doors.

Foaly was waiting for her in Ops. Foaly was a paranoid centaur, convinced that human intelligence agencies were monitoring his transport and surveillance network. To prevent them reading his mind, he wore a tinfoil hat at all times.

He glanced up sharply when Holly entered through the pneumatic double doors.

'Anybody see you come in here?'

Holly thought about it.

'The FBI, CIA, NSA, DEA, MI6. Oh and the EIB.'

Foaly frowned. 'The EIB?'

'Everyone in the building,' smirked Holly.

Foaly rose from his swivel chair and clip-clopped over to her.

'Oh, you're very funny, Short. A regular riot. I thought the Hamburg affair might have knocked some of the cockiness out of you. If I were you, I'd concentrate on the job in hand.'

Holly composed herself. He was right.

'OK, Foaly. Fill me in.'

The centaur pointed to a live feed from the Eurosat, which was displayed on a large plasma screen.

'This red dot is the troll. He's moving towards Martina Franca, a fortified town near the city of Brindisi. As far as we can tell, he stumbled into vent E7. It was on cool-down after a surface shot, that's why the troll isn't crispy barbecue right now.'

Holly grimaced. Charming, she thought.

'We've been lucky in that our target has bumped into some food along the way. He chewed on a couple of cows for an hour or two, so that bought us a bit of time.'

'A couple of cows?' exclaimed Holly. 'Just how big is this fellow?'

Foaly adjusted his foil bonnet. 'Bull troll. Fully grown. One hundred and eighty kilos, with tusks like a wild boar. A really wild boar.'

Holly swallowed. Suddenly Recon seemed a much better job than Retrieval.

'Right. What have you got for me?'

Foaly cantered across to the equipment table. He selected what looked like a rectangular wristwatch.

'Locator. You find him, we find you. Routine stuff.'

'Video?'

The centaur clipped a small cylinder into the accommodating groove on Holly's helmet.

'Live feed. Nuclear battery. No time limit. The mike is voice-activated.'

'Good,' said Holly. 'Root said I should take a weapon on this one. Just in case.'

'Way ahead of you,' said Foaly. He picked a platinum handgun from the pile. 'A Neutrino 2000. The latest model. Even the tunnel gangs don't have these. Three settings, if you don't mind. Scorched, well done and crisped to a cinder. Nuclear power source too, so plug away. This baby will outlive you by a thousand years.'

Holly strapped the lightweight weapon into her shoulder holster.

'I'm ready ... I think.'

Foaly chuckled. 'I doubt it. No one's ever really ready for a troll.'

'Thanks for the confidence booster.'

'Confidence is ignorance,' advised the centaur. 'If you're feeling cocky, it's because there's something you don't know.'

Holly thought about arguing, but didn't. Maybe it was because she had a sneaking suspicion that Foaly was right.

The pressure elevators were powered by gaseous columns vented from the earth's core. The LEP tech boys, under Foaly's guidance, had fashioned titanium eggs that could ride on the currents. They had their own independent motors, but for an express ride to the surface there was nothing like the blast from a tidal flare.

Foaly led her past a long line of chute bays to E7. The pod sat in its clamp, looking very fragile to be rocketing about on magma streams. Its underside was charred black and pockmarked from shrapnel.

The centaur slapped it fondly on a fender. 'This baby's been in service for fifty years. Oldest model still in the chutes.'

Holly swallowed. The chutes made her nervous enough without riding in an antique.

'When does it come off-line?'

Foaly scratched his hairy belly. 'With funding the way it is, not until we have us a fatality.'

Holly cranked open the heavy door, the rubber seal yielding with a hiss. The pod was not built for comfort. There was barely enough space for a restraining seat among the jumble of electronics.

'What's that?' asked Holly, pointing at a greyish stain on the seat's headrest.

Foaly shuffled uncomfortably.

'Erm ... brain fluid, I think. We had a pressure leak on the last mission. But that's plugged now. And the officer lived. Down a few IQ points, but alive, and he can still take liquids.'

'Well, that's all right then,' quipped Holly, threading her way through the mass of wires.

Foaly strapped the harness on to her, checking the restraints thoroughly.

'All set?'

Holly nodded.

Foaly tapped her helmet mike. 'Keep in touch,' he said, pulling the door behind him.

Don't think about it, Holly told herself. Don't think about the white-hot magma flow that's going to engulf this tiny craft. Don't think about hurtling towards the surface with a MACH 2 force trying to turn you inside-out. And certainly don't think about the blood-crazed troll ready to disembowel you with his tusks. Nope. Don't think about any of that stuff ... Too late.

Foaly's voice sounded in her earpiece. 'T-minus twenty,' he said. 'We're on a secure channel in case the Mud People have started underground monitoring. You never know. An oil tanker from the Middle East intercepted a transmission one time. What a mess that was.'

Holly adjusted her helmet mike.

'Focus, Foaly. My life is in your hands here.'

'Uh ... OK, sorry. We're going to use the rail to drop you into E7's main shaft, there's a surge due any minute. That should see you past the first hundred clicks, then you're on your own.'

Holly nodded, curling her fingers around the twin joysticks.

'All systems check. Fire it up.'

There was a whoosh as the pod's engines ignited. The tiny craft jostled in its housing, shaking Holly like a bead in a rattle. She could barely hear Foaly speaking into her ear.

'You're in the secondary shaft now. Get ready to fly, Short.'

Holly pulled a rubber cylinder from the dash and slipped it between her teeth. No good having a radio if you've swallowed your tongue. She activated the external cameras and put the view on screen.

The entrance to E7 was creeping towards her. The air was shimmering in the landing-light glow. White-hot sparks tumbled into the secondary shaft. Holly couldn't hear the roar, but she could imagine it. A raw skinning wind like a million trolls howling.

Her fingers tightened around the joysticks. The pod shuddered to a halt at the lip. The chute stretched above and below. Massive. Boundless. Like dropping an ant down a drainpipe.

'Right-o,' crackled Foaly. 'Hold on to your breakfast. Rollercoasters ain't got nothing on this.'

Holly nodded. She couldn't speak, not with the rubber in her mouth. The centaur would be able to see her in the podcam anyway.

'Sayonara, sweetheart,' said Foaly, and pressed the button.

The pod's clamp tilted, rolling Holly into the abyss. Her stomach tightened as G-force took hold, dragging her to the centre of the earth. The seismology section had a million probes down here, with a 99.8 success rate at predicting the magma flares. But there was always that point two per cent.

The fall seemed to last for an eternity. And just when Holly had mentally consigned herself to the scrap heap, she felt it. That unforgettable vibration. The feeling that, outside her tiny sphere, the whole world was being shaken apart. Here it comes.

'Fins,' she said, spitting the word around the cylinder.

Foaly may have replied, she couldn't hear him any more. Holly couldn't even hear herself, but she did see the stabilization fins slide out on the monitor.

The flare caught her like a hurricane, spinning the pod at first until the fins caught. Half-melted rocks pelted the craft's underside, jolting it towards the chute walls. Holly compensated with bursts from the joysticks.

The heat was tremendous in the confined space, enough to fry a human. But fairy lungs are made of stronger stuff. The acceleration dragged at her body with invisible hands, stretching the flesh over her arms and face. Holly blinked salty sweat from her eyes and concentrated on the monitor. The flare had totally engulfed her pod, and it was a big one too. Force seven at the very least. A good 500-metre girth. Orange-striped magma swirled and hissed around her, searching for a weak point in the metal casing.

The pod groaned and complained, fifty-year-old rivets threatening to pop. Holly shook her head. The first thing she was going to do on her return was kick Foaly straight in the hairy behind. She felt like a nut inside a shell, between a gnome's molars. Doomed.

A bow plate buckled, popped in as though punched by a giant fist. The pressure light blinked on. Holly could feel her head being squeezed. The eyes would be first to go - popping like ripe berries.

She checked the dials. Twenty more seconds before she rode out the flare and was running on thermals. Those twenty seconds seemed like an age. Holly sealed the helmet to protect her eyes, riding out the final barrage of rocks.

And suddenly they were clear, sailing upwards on the comparatively gentle spirals of hot air. Holly added her own thrusters to the upward force. No time to waste floating around on the wind.

Above her, a circle of neon lights marked the docking zone. Holly swivelled horizontal and pointed the docking nodes at the lights. This was delicate. Many Recon pilots had made it this far, only to miss the port and lose valuable time. Not Holly. She was a natural. First in the academy.

She gave the thrusters one final squeeze and coasted the last hundred metres. Using the rudders beneath her feet, she teased the pod through the circle of light and into its clamp on the landing pad. The nodes revolved, settling into their grooves. Safe.

Holly smacked herself on the chest, releasing the safety harness. Once the door seal was open, sweet surface air flooded the cabin. There was nothing like that first breath after a ride in the chutes. She breathed deeply, purging the stale pod air from her lungs. How had the People ever left the surface? Sometimes she wished that her ancestors had stayed to fight it out with the Mud People, but there were too many of them. Unlike fairies, who could produce only a single child every twenty years, Mud People bred like rodents. Numbers would subdue even magic.

Although she was enjoying the night air, Holly could taste traces of pollutants. The Mud People destroyed everything they came into contact with. Of course they didn't live in the mud any more. Not in this country, at least. Oh no. Big fancy dwellings with rooms for everything - rooms for sleeping, rooms for eating, even a room to go to the toilet! Indoors! Holly shuddered. Imagine going to the toilet inside your own house. Disgusting! The only good thing about going to the toilet was the minerals being returned to the earth, but the Mud People had even managed to botch that up by treating the ... stuff ... with bottles of blue chemicals. If anyone had told her a hundred years ago that humans would be taking the fertile out of fertilizer, she would have told them to get some air holes drilled in their skull.

Holly unhooked a set of wings from their bracket. They were double ovals, with a clunky motor. She moaned. Dragonflies. She hated that model. Petrol engine, if you don't mind. And heavier than a pig dipped in mud. Now the Hummingbird Z7, that was transport. Whisper silent, with a satellite-bounced solar battery that would fly you twice around the world. But there were budget cuts again.

On her wrist, the locator began to beep. She was in range. Holly stepped out of the pod and on to the landing bay. She was inside a camouflaged mound of earth, commonly known as a fairy fort. Indeed, the People used to live in these until they were driven deeper underground. There wasn't much technology. Just a few external monitors, and a self-destruct device should the bay be discovered.

There was nothing on the screens. All clear. The pneumatic doors were slightly askew where the troll had barged through, but otherwise everything seemed operational. Holly strapped on the wings, stepping into the outside world.

The Italian night sky was crisp and brisk, infused with olives and vine. Crickets clicked in the rough grass and moths fluttered in the starlight. Holly couldn't stop herself smiling. It was worth the risk, every bit of it.

Speaking of risk ... She checked the locator. The bip was much stronger now. The troll was almost at the town walls! She could appreciate nature after the mission was over. Now it was time for action.

Holly primed the wings' motor, pulling the starter cord over her shoulder. Nothing. She fumed silently. Every spoilt kid in Haven had a Hummingbird for their wilderness holidays, and here were the LEP with wings that were junk when they were new. She yanked the cord again and then again. On the third wrench it caught, spewing a stream of smoke and fumes into the night. 'About time,' she grunted, flicking the throttle wide open. The wings flapped their way up to a steady beat and, with not a little effort, lifted Captain Holly Short into the night sky.

Even without the locator, the troll would have been easy to follow. It had left a trail of destruction wider than a tunnel excavator. Holly flew low, skipping between mist hazes and trees, matching the troll's course. The crazed creature had cut a swathe through the middle of a vineyard, turned a stone wall to rubble and left a guard dog gibbering under a hedge. Then she flew over the cows. It was not a pretty sight. Without going into details, let's just say that there wasn't much left besides horns and hooves.

The red bip was louder now. Louder meant closer. She could see the town below her, nestled on top of a low hill, surrounded by a crenellated wall from the Middle Ages. Lights still burned in most windows. Time for a little magic.

A lot of the magic attributed to the People is just superstition. But they do have certain powers. Healing, the mesmer and shielding being among them. Shielding is really a misnomer. What fairies actually do is to vibrate at such a high frequency that they are never in one place long enough to be seen. Humans may notice a slight shimmer in the air if they are paying close attention - which they rarely are. And even then the shimmer is generally attributed to evaporation. Typical of Mud People to invent a complicated explanation for a simple phenomenon.

Holly switched on her shield. It took a bit more out of her than usual. She could feel the strain in the beads of sweat on her forehead. I really should complete the Ritual, she thought. The sooner the better.

Some commotion below broke into her thoughts. Something that didn't gel with the night-time noises. Holly adjusted the trim on her backpack and flew in for a closer look. Look only, she reminded herself, that was her job. A Recon officer was sent up the chutes to pinpoint the target, while the Retrieval boys took a nice cushy shuttle.

The troll was directly below her, pounding against the town's outer wall, which was coming away in chunks beneath his powerful fingers. Holly sucked in a startled gasp. This guy was a monster! Big as an elephant and ten times as mean. But this particular beast was worse than mean, he was scared.

'Control,' said Holly into her mike. 'Runner located. Situation critical topside.'

Root himself was on the other end of the comlink.

'Clarify, Captain.'

Holly pointed her video link at the troll.

'Runner is going through the town wall. Contact imminent. How far away are Retrieval?'

'ETA five minutes minimum. We're still in the shuttle.'

Holly bit her lip. Root was in the shuttle?

'That's too long, Commander. This whole town is going to explode in ten seconds ... I'm going in.'

'Negative, Holly ... Captain Short. You don't have an invite. You know the law. Hold your position.'

'But, Commander -'

Root cut her off. 'No! No buts, Captain. Hang back. That's an order!'

Holly's entire body felt like a heartbeat. Petrol fumes were addling her brain. What could she do? What was the right decision to make? Lives or orders?

Then the troll broke through the wall and a child's voice split the night.

'Aiuto!' it screamed.

Help. An invitation. At a stretch.

'Sorry, Commander. The troll is light-crazy and there are children in there.'

She could imagine Root's face, purple with rage as he spat into the mike.

'I'll have your stripes, Short! You'll spend the next hundred years on drain duty!'

But it was no use. Holly had disconnected her mike and swooped in after the troll.

Streamlining her body, Captain Short ducked into the hole. She appeared to be in a restaurant. A packed restaurant. The troll had been temporarily blinded by the electric light and was thrashing about in the centre of the floor.

The patrons were stunned. Even the child's plea had petered out. They sat gaping, party hats perched comically on their heads. Waiters froze, huge trays of pasta quivering on their splayed fingers. Chubby Italian infants covered their eyes with chubby fingers. It was always like this in the beginning: the shocked silence. Then came the screaming.

A wine bottle crashed to the floor. It broke the spell. The pandemonium started. Holly winced. Trolls hated noise almost as much as light.

The troll lifted massive shaggy shoulders, its retractable claws sliding out with an ominous schiick. Classic predator behaviour. The beast was about to strike.

Holly drew her weapon and flicked it up to the second setting. She couldn't kill the troll under any circumstances. Not to save humans. But she could certainly put him out until Retrieval arrived.

Aiming for the weak point at the base of the skull, she let the troll have a long burst of the concentrated ion ray. The beast staggered, stumbled a few steps, then got very angry.

It's OK, thought Holly, I'm shielded. Invisible. To any onlookers it would seem as though the pulsing blue beam emanated from thin air.

The troll rounded on her, its muddy dreadlocks swinging like candles.

No panic. It can't see me.

The troll picked up a table.

Invisible. Totally invisible.

He pulled back a shaggy arm and let fly.

Just a slight shimmer in the air.

The table tumbled straight towards her head.

Holly moved. A second too late. The table clipped her backpack, knocking the petrol tank clean off. It span through the air, trailing flammable fluid.

Italian restaurants - wouldn't you know it full of candles. The tank twirled right through an elaborate candelabrum. It burst into flames, like some deadly firework. Most of the petrol landed on the troll. So did Holly.

The troll could see her. There was no doubt about it. It squinted at her through the hated light, its brow a rictus of pain and fear. Her shield was off. Her magic had gone.

Holly twisted in the troll's grip, but it was useless. The creature's fingers were the size of bananas, but nowhere near as pliant. They were squashing the breath from her ribcage with savage ease. Needle-like claws were scraping at the toughened material of her uniform. Any second now, they would punch through, and that would be that.

Holly couldn't think. The restaurant was a carousel of chaos. The troll was gnashing its tusks; greasy molars trying to grip her helmet. Holly could smell its fetid breath through her filters. She could smell the odour of burning fur too, as the fire spread along the troll's back.

The beast's green tongue rasped across her visor, sliming the lower section. The visor! That was it. Her only chance. Holly wormed her free hand to the helmet controls. The tunnel lights. High beams.

She depressed the sunken button and 800 watts of unfiltered light blasted from the twin spotlights above her eyes.

The troll reared back, a penetrating scream exploding from between rows of teeth. Dozens of glasses and bottles shattered where they stood. It was too much for the poor beast. Stunned, set on fire and now blinded. The shock and pain made their way through to its tiny brain, ordering it to shut down. The troll complied, keeling over with almost comical stiffness. Holly rolled to avoid a scything tusk.

There was complete silence, but for tinkling glass, crackling fur and the sudden release of breath. Holly climbed shakily to her feet. There were a lot of eyes following her - human eyes. She was 100 per cent visible. And these humans wouldn't stay complacent for long. This breed never did. Containment was the issue.

She raised her empty palms. A gesture of peace.

'Scusatemi tutti,' she said, the language flowing easily from her tongue.

The Italians, ever graceful, muttered that it was nothing.

Holly reached slowly into her pocket and withdrew a small sphere. She placed it in the middle of the floor.

'Guardate,' she said. Look.

The restaurant's patrons complied, leaning in to see the small silver ball. It was ticking, faster and faster, almost like a countdown. Holly turned her back to the sphere. Three, two, one ...

Boom! Flash! Mass unconsciousness. Nothing fatal, but headaches all around in about forty minutes. Holly sighed. Safe. For the moment. She ran to the door and slid the latch across. Nobody was going in or out. Except through the big gaping hole in the wall. Next she doused the smouldering troll with the contents of the restaurant's fire extinguisher, hoping the icy powder wouldn't revive the sleeping behemoth.

Holly surveyed the mess she had created. There was no doubt, it was a shambles. Worse than Hamburg. Root would skin her alive. She'd rather face the troll any day. This was the end of her career for sure, but suddenly that didn't seem so important because her ribs were aching and she had a blinder of a pressure headache coming on. Perhaps a rest, just for a second, so she could pull herself together before Retrieval showed up.

Holly didn't even bother looking for a chair. She simply allowed her legs to buckle beneath her, sinking to the chessboard lino floor.

Waking up to Commander Root's bulging features is the stuff of nightmares. Holly's eyes flickered open, and for a second she could have sworn that there was concern in those eyes. But then it was gone, replaced by the customary vein-popping fury.

'Captain Short!' he roared, mindless of her headache. 'What in the name of sanity happened here?'

Holly rose shakily to her feet.

'I ... That is ... There was ...' The sentences just wouldn't come.

'You disobeyed a direct order. I told you to hang back! You know it's forbidden to enter a human building without an invitation.'

Holly shook the shadows from her vision.

'I got invited in. A child called for help.'

'You're on shaky ground there, Short.'

'There is precedent, sir. Corporal Rowe versus the State. The jury ruled that the trapped woman's cry for help could be accepted as an invitation into the building. Anyway, you're all here now. That means you accepted the invitation too.'

'Hmm,' said Root doubtfully. 'I suppose you were lucky. Things could have been worse.'

Holly looked around. Things couldn't have been a lot worse. The establishment was pretty trashed and there were forty humans out for the count. The tech boys were attaching mind-wipe electrodes to the temples of unconscious diners.

'We managed to secure the area, in spite of half the town hammering on the door.'

'What about the hole?'

Root smirked. 'See for yourself.'

Holly glanced over. Retrieval had jimmied a hologram lead into the existing electricity sockets and were projecting an unbattered wall over the hole. The holograms were handy for quick patches, but no good under scrutiny. Anyone who examined the wall too closely would have noticed that the slightly transparent patch was exactly the same as the stretch beside it. In this case there were two identical patches of spiderweb cracks and two reproductions of the same Rembrandt. But the people inside the pizzeria were in no condition to examine walls, and by the time they woke up, the wall would have been repaired by the Telekinetic Division and the entire paranormal experience would be removed from their memories.

A Retrieval officer bolted from the restroom.

'Commander!'

'Yes, Sergeant?'

'There's a human in here, sir. The Concusser didn't reach him. He's coming, sir. Right now, sir!'

'Shields!' barked Root. 'Everyone!'

Holly tried. She really did. But it wouldn't come. Her magic was gone. A toddler waddled out of the bathroom, his eyes heavy with sleep. He pointed a pudgy finger directly at Holly.

'Ciao, folletta,' he said, before climbing into his father's lap to continue his snooze.

Root shimmered back into the visible spectrum. He was, if possible, even angrier than before.

'What happened to your shield, Short?'

Holly swallowed.

'Stress, Commander,' she offered hopefully.

Root wasn't having any of it. 'You lied to me, Captain. You're not running hot at all, are you?'

Holly shook her head mutely.

'How long since you completed the Ritual?'

Holly chewed her lip. 'I'd say ... about ... four years, sir.'

Root nearly popped a vein.

'Four ... Four years? It's a wonder you lasted this long! Do it now. Tonight! You're not coming below ground again without your powers. You're a danger to yourself and your fellow officers!'

'Yessir.'

'Get a set of Hummingbirds from Retrieval and zip across to the old country. There's a full moon tonight.'

'Yessir.'

'And don't think I've forgotten about this shambles. We'll talk about it when you get back.'

'Yessir. Very good, sir.'

Holly turned to go, but Root cleared his throat for attention.

'Oh, and Captain Short ...'

'Yessir?'

Root's face had lost its purple tinge and he almost seemed embarrassed.

'Well done on the life-saving thing. Could have been worse, an awful lot worse.'

Holly beamed behind her visor. Perhaps she wouldn't be kicked out of Recon after all.

'Thank you, sir.'

Root grunted, his complexion returning to its normal ruddy hue.

'Now get out of here, and don't come back until you're full to the tips of your ears with magic!'

Holly sighed. So much for gratitude.

'Yes, sir. On my way, sir.'

CHAPTER 4: ABDUCTION

ARTEMIS'S main problem was one of location - how to locate a leprechaun. This was one sly bunch of fairies, hanging around for God knows how many millennia and still not one photo, not one frame of video. Not even a Loch-Ness-type hoax. They weren't exactly a sociable group. And they were smart too. No one had ever got his hands on fairy gold. But no one had ever had access to the Book either. And puzzles were so simple when you had the key.

Artemis had summoned the Butlers to his study, and spoke to them now from behind a mini-lectern.

'There are certain rituals every fairy must complete to renew his magic,' explained Artemis.

Butler and Juliet nodded, as though this were a normal briefing.

Artemis flicked through his hard copy of the Book and selected a passage.

From the earth thine power flows,
Given through courtesy, so thanks are owed.
Pluck thou the magick seed,
Where full moon, ancient oak and twisted water meet.
And bury it far from where it was found,
So return your gift into the ground.'

Artemis closed the text. 'Do you see?'

Butler and Juliet kept nodding, while still looking thoroughly mystified.

Artemis sighed. 'The leprechaun is bound by certain rituals. Very specific rituals, I might add. We can use them to track one down.'

Juliet raised a hand, even though she herself was four years Artemis's senior.

'Yes?'

'Well, the thing is, Artemis,' she said hesitantly, twisting a strand of blonde hair in a way that several of the local louts considered extremely attractive. 'The bit about leprechauns.'

Artemis frowned. It was a bad sign. 'Your point, Juliet?'

'Well, leprechauns. You know they're not real, don't you?'

Butler winced. It was his fault really. He'd never got around to filling in his sister on the mission parameters.

Artemis scowled reprovingly at him.

'Butler hasn't already talked to you about this?'

'No. Was he supposed to?'

'Yes, he certainly was. Perhaps he thought you'd laugh at him.'

Butler squirmed. That was exactly what he'd thought. Juliet was the only person alive who laughed at him with embarrassing regularity. Most other people did it once. Just once.

Artemis cleared his throat. 'Let us proceed under the assumption that the fairy folk do exist and that I am not a gibbering moron.'

Butler nodded weakly. Juliet was unconvinced.

'Very well. Now, as I was saying, the People have to fulfil a specific ritual to renew their powers. According to my interpretation, they must pick a seed from an ancient oak tree by the bend in a river. And they must do this during the full moon.'

The light began to dawn in Butler's eyes. 'So all we have to do ...'

'Is run a cross-reference through the weather satellites, which I already have. Believe it or not, there aren't that many ancient oaks left, if you take ancient to be a hundred years plus. When you factor in the river bend and full moon, there are precisely one hundred and twenty-nine sites to be surveyed in this country.'

Butler grinned. Stakeout. Now the Master was talking his language.

'There are preparations to be made for our guest's arrival,' said Artemis, handing a typewritten sheet of A4 to Juliet. 'These alterations must be made to the cellar. See to it, Juliet. To the letter.'

'Yes, Arty.'

Artemis frowned, but only slightly. For reasons that he couldn't quite fathom, he didn't mind terribly when Juliet called him by the pet name his mother had for him.

Butler scratched his chin thoughtfully. Artemis noticed the gesture.

'Query?'

'Well, Artemis. The sprite in Ho Chi Minh City

Artemis nodded. 'I know. Why didn't we simply abduct her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'According to Chi Lun's Almanac of the People, a seventh-century manuscript recovered from the lost city of Sh'shamo: "Once a fairy has taken spirits with the Mud People" - that's us, by the way - "they are forever dead to their brothers and sisters." So there was no guarantee that that particular fairy was worth even an ounce of gold. No, my old friend, we need fresh blood. All clear?'

Butler nodded.

'Good. Now, there are several items you will need to procure for our moonlight jaunts.'

Butler scanned the sheet: basic field equipment, a few eyebrow raisers, nothing too puzzling until ...

'Sunglasses? At night?'

When Artemis smiled, as he did now, one almost expected vampire fangs to sprout from his gums. 'Yes, Butler. Sunglasses. Trust me.' And Butler did. Implicitly.

Holly activated the thermal coil in her suit and climbed to 4,000 metres. The Hummingbird wings were top of the range. The battery readout showed four red bars - more than enough for a quick jaunt through mainland Europe and across the British Isles. Of course, the regulations said always travel over water if possible, but Holly could never resist knocking the snowcap from the highest alp on her way past.

The suit protected Holly from the worst of the elements, but she could still feel the chill sinking into her bones. The moon seemed huge from this altitude, the craters on its surface easily distinguishable. Tonight it was a perfect sphere. A magical full moon. Immigration would have their hands full, as thousands of surface-sick fairies were drawn irresistibly overground. A large percentage would make it, probably causing mayhem in their revelry. The earth's mantle was riddled with illegal tunnels and it was impossible to police them all.

Holly followed the Italian coast up to Monaco and from there across the Alps to France. She loved flying, all fairies did. According to the Book, they had once been equipped with wings of their own, but evolution had stripped them of this power. All but the sprites. One school of thought believed that the People were descended from airborne dinosaurs. Possibly pterodactyls. Much of the upper-body skeletal structure was the same. This theory would certainly explain the tiny nub of bone on each shoulder blade.

Holly toyed with the idea of visiting Disneyland Paris. The LEP had several undercover operatives stationed there, most of them working in the Snow White exhibit. It was one of the few places on earth that the People could pass unnoticed. But if some tourist got a photo of her and it ended up on the Internet, Root would have her badge for sure. With a sigh of regret, she passed over the shower of multicoloured fireworks below.

Once over the Channel, Holly flew low, skipping over the white-crested waves. She called out to the dolphins and they rose to the surface, leaping from the water to match her pace. She could see the pollution in them, bleaching their skin white and causing red sores on their backs. And although she smiled, her heart was breaking. Mud People had a lot to answer for.

Finally the coast loomed ahead of her. The old country. Eiriu, the land where time began. The most magical place on the planet. It was here, 10,000 years ago, that the ancient fairy race, the De Danann, had battled against the demon Fomorians, carving the famous Giant's Causeway with the strength of their magical blasts. It was here that the Lia Fáil stood, the rock at the centre of the universe, where the fairy kings and later the human Ard Rí were crowned. And it was also here, unfortunately, that the Mud People were most in tune with magic, which resulted in a far higher People-sighting rate than you got anywhere else on the planet. Thankfully the rest of the world assumed that the Irish were crazy, a theory that the Irish themselves did nothing to debunk. They had somehow got it into their heads that each fairy lugged around a pot of gold with them wherever they went. While it was true that LEP had a

ransom fund, because of its officers' high-risk occupation, no human had ever taken a chunk of it yet. This didn't stop the Irish population in general from skulking around rainbows, hoping to win the supernatural lottery.

But in spite of all that, if there was one race the People felt an affinity for it was the Irish. Perhaps it was their eccentricity, perhaps their dedication to the craic, as they called it. And if the People were actually related to humans, as another theory had it, odds on it was the Emerald Isle where it started.

Holly punched up a map on her wrist locator and set it to sweep for magical hotspots. The best site would obviously be Tara, near the Lia Fáil, but on a night like tonight, every traditionalist fairy with an overground pass would be dancing around the holy scene, so best to give it a miss.

There was a secondary site not far from here, just off the south-east coast. Easy access from the air, but remote and desolate for land-bound humans. Holly reined in the throttle and descended to eighty metres. She skipped over a bristling evergreen forest, emerging in a moonlit meadow. A silver thread of river bisected the field and there, nestling in the fold of a meander loop, was the proud oak.

Holly checked her locator for life forms. Once she judged the cow two fields over not to be a threat, she cut her engines and glided to the foot of the mighty tree.

Four months of stakeout. Even Butler, the consummate professional, was beginning to dread the long nights of damp and insect bites. Thankfully, the moon was not full every night.

It was always the same. They would crouch in their foil-lined hide in complete silence, Butler repeatedly checking his equipment, while Artemis stared unblinking through the eye of the scope. At times like these, nature seemed deafening in their confined space. Butler longed to whistle, to make conversation, anything to break the unnatural silence. But Artemis's concentration was absolute. He would brook no interference or lapse of focus. This was business.

Tonight they were in the south-east. The most inaccessible site yet. Butler had been forced to make three trips to the jeep in order to hump the equipment across a stile, a bog and two fields. His boots and trousers were ruined. And now he would have to sit in the hide with ditchwater soaking into the seat of his trousers. Artemis had somehow contrived to remain spotless.

The hide was ingenious in design and interest had already been expressed in the manufacturing rights mostly by military representatives - but Artemis had resolved to sell the patent to a sporting-goods multinational. It was constructed of an elasticated foil polymer on a multi-hinged fibreglass skeleton. The foil, similar to that used by NASA, trapped the heat inside the structure while preventing the camouflaged outside surface from overheating. This ensured that any animals sensitive to heat would be unaware of its presence. The hinges meant that the hide would move almost like a liquid, filling whatever depression it was dropped into. Instant shelter and vantage point. You simply placed the Velcroed bag in a hole and pulled the string.

But all the cleverness in the world couldn't improve the atmosphere. Something was troubling Artemis. It was plain in the web of premature lines that spread from the corners of his deep-blue eyes.

After several nights of fruitless surveillance, Butler plucked up enough courage to ask ...

'Artemis,' he began hesitantly, 'I realize it's not my place, but I know there's something wrong. And if there's anything I can do to help ...'

Artemis didn't speak for several moments. And for those few moments, Butler saw the face of a young boy. The boy Artemis might have been.

'It's my mother, Butler,' he said at last. 'I'm beginning to wonder if she'll ever -'

Then the proximity alarm flashed red.

Holly hooked the wings over a low branch, unstrapping the helmet to give her ears some air. You had to be careful with elfin ears - a few hours in the helmet and they started to flake. She gave the tips a massage. No dry skin there. That was because she had a daily moisturizing regime, not like some of the male LEP officers. When they took off their helmets, you'd swear it had just started to snow.

Holly paused for a minute to admire the view. Ireland certainly was picturesque. Even the Mud People hadn't been able to destroy that. Not yet anyway ... Give them another century or two. The river was folding gently before her like a silver snake, hissing as the water tumbled across a stony bed. The oak tree crackled overhead, its branches rasping together in the bracing breeze.

Now, to work. She could do the tourist thing all night once her business was complete. A seed. She needed a seed. Holly bent to the ground, brushing the dried leaves and twigs from the clay's surface. Her fingers closed around a smooth acorn. That wasn't hard now, was it? she thought. All that remained for her to do was plant it somewhere else and her powers would come rushing back.

Butler checked the porta-radar, muting the volume in case the equipment betrayed their position. The red arm swept the screen with agonizing lethargy, and then ... Flash! An upright figure by the tree. Too small for an adult, the wrong proportions for a child. He gave Artemis the thumbs-up. Possible match.

Artemis nodded, strapping the mirrored sunglasses across his brow. Butler followed his lead, popping the cap on his weapon's starlight scope. This was no ordinary dart rifle. It had been specially tooled for a Kenyan ivory hunter and had the range and rapid-fire capacity of a Kalashnikov. Butler had picked it up for a song from a government official after the ivory poacher's execution.

They crept into the night with practised silence. The diminutive figure before them unhooked a contraption from around its shoulders and lifted a full-face helmet from a definitely non-human head. Butler wrapped the rifle strap twice around his wrist, pulling the stock into his shoulder. He activated the scope and a red dot appeared in the centre of the figure's back. Artemis nodded and his manservant squeezed the trigger.

In spite of a million to one odds, it was at that precise moment that the figure bent low to the earth.

Something whizzed over Holly's head, something that glinted in the starlight. Holly had enough on-the-job experience to realize that she was under fire, and immediately curled her elfin frame into a ball, minimizing the target.

She drew her pistol, rolling towards the shelter of the tree trunk. Her brain scrambled for possibilities. Who could be shooting at her and why?

Something was waiting beside the tree. Something roughly the size of a mountain, but considerably more mobile.

'Nice pea-shooter,' grinned the figure, smothering Holly's gun hand in a turnip-sized fist.

Holly managed to extricate her fingers a nanosecond before they snapped like brittle spaghetti.

'I don't suppose you would consider peaceful surrender?' said a cold voice behind her.

Holly turned, elbows raised for combat.

'No,' sighed the boy melodramatically. 'I suppose not.'

Holly put on her best brave face.

'Stay back, human. You don't know what you're dealing with.'

The boy laughed. 'I believe, fairy, that you are the one unfamiliar with the facts.'

Fairy? He knew she was a fairy.

'I have magic mud-worm. Enough to turn you and your gorilla into pig droppings.'

The boy took a step closer. 'Brave words, miss. But lies nonetheless. If, as you say, you had magic, you would have no doubt used it by now. No, I suspect that you have gone too long without the Ritual and you are here to replenish your powers.'

Holly was dumbfounded. There was a human before her, casually spouting sacred secrets. This was disastrous. Catastrophic. It could mean the end of generations of peace. If the humans were aware of a fairy subculture, it was only a matter of time before the two species went to war. She must do something, and there was only one weapon left in her arsenal.

The mesmer is the lowest form of magic and requires only a trickle of power. There are even certain humans with a bent for the talent. It is within the ability of even the most drained fairy to put a complete mind kibosh on any human alive.

Holly summoned the final dribble of magic from the base of her skull.

'Human,' she intoned, her voice suddenly resonating with bass tones, 'your will is mine.'

Artemis smiled, safe behind his mirrored lenses. 'I doubt it,' he said, and nodded curtly.

Holly felt the dart puncture the suit's toughened material, depositing its load of curare and succinylcholine chloride-based tranquillizer into her shoulder. The world instantly dissolved into a series of technicoloured bubbles and, try as she might, Holly couldn't seem to hold on to more than one thought. And that thought was: how did they know? It spiralled around her head as she sank into unconsciousness. How did they know? How did they know? How did they ...

Artemis saw the pain in the creature's eyes as the hollow hypodermic plunged into her body. And for a moment he experienced misgivings. A female. He hadn't expected that. A female, like Juliet, or Mother. Then the moment passed and he was himself again.

'Good shooting,' he said, bending to study their prisoner. Definitely a girl. Pretty too. In a pointy sort of way.

'Sir?'

'Hmm?'

Butler was pointing to the creature's helmet. It was half-buried in a drift of leaves where the fairy had dropped it. A buzzing noise was coming from the crown.

Artemis picked up the contraption by the straps, searching for the source.

'Ah, here we are.' He plucked the viewcam from its slot, careful to point the lens away from him. 'Fairy technology. Most impressive,' he muttered, popping the battery from its groove. The camera whined and died. 'Nuclear power source, if I'm not mistaken. We must be careful not to underestimate our opponents.'

Butler nodded, sliding their captive into an oversized duffel bag. Something else to be lugged across two fields, a bog and a stile.

CHAPTER 5: MISSING IN ACTION

COMMANDER Root was sucking on a particularly noxious fungus cigar. Several of the Retrieval Squad had nearly passed out in the shuttle. Even the pong from the manacled troll seemed mild in comparison. Of course, no one said anything, their boss being touchier than a septic bum boil.

Foaly, on the other hand, delighted in antagonizing his superior. 'None of your rancid stogies in here, Commander!' he brayed, the moment Root made it back to Ops. 'The computers don't like smoke!'

Root scowled, certain that Foaly was making this up. Nevertheless, the commander was not prepared to risk a computer crash in the middle of an alert and so doused his cigar in the coffee cup of a passing gremlin.

'Now, Foaly, what's this so-called alert? And it better be good this time!'

The centaur had a tendency to go completely hyper over trivialities. He'd once gone to Defcon Two because his human satellite stations were out.

'It's good all right,' Foaly assured him. 'Or should I say bad? Very bad.'

Root felt the ulcer in his gut begin to bubble like a volcano.

'How bad?'

Foaly punched up Ireland on the Eurosat. 'We lost contact with Captain Short.'

'Why am I not surprised?' groaned Root, burying his face in his hands.

'We had her all the way over the Alps.'

'The Alps? She took a land route?'

Foaly nodded. 'Against regulations, I know. But everyone does it.'

The commander agreed grudgingly. Who could resist a view like that? As a rookie, he'd been placed on report himself for that exact offence.

'OK. Move on. When did we lose her?'

Foaly opened a VT box on the screen.

'This is the feed from Holly's helmet unit. Here we are over Disneyland Paris'

The centaur pressed the fast-forward.

'Now dolphins, blah blah blah. The Irish coastline. Still no worries. Look, her locator comes into shot. Captain Short is scanning for magic hotspots. Site fifty-seven shows up red, so she heads for that one.'

'Why not Tara?'

Foaly snorted. 'Tara? Every fairy hippie in the northern hemisphere will be dancing around the Lia Fáil at the full moon. There'll be so many shields on, it'll look like the whole place is under water.'

'Fine,' grunted Root through gritted teeth. 'Just get on with it, will you.'

'All right. Don't get your ears in a knot.' Foaly skipped several minutes of tape. 'Now. Here's the interesting bit ... Nice smooth landing, hangs up the wings. Holly takes off the helmet.'

'Against regulations,' interjected Root. 'LEP officers must never remove -'

'LEP officers must never remove their headgear above ground, unless said headgear is defective,' completed Foaly. 'Yes, Commander, we all know what the handbook says. But are you trying to tell me that you never sneaked a breath of air after a few hours in the sky?'

'No,' admitted Root. 'What are you? Her fairy godmother or something? Get to the important bit!'

Foaly smirked behind his hand. Driving up Root's blood pressure was one of the few perks of the job. No one else would dare to do it. That was because everybody else was replaceable. Not Foaly. He'd built the system from scratch and if anyone else even tried to boot it up, a hidden virus would bring it crashing about their pointy ears.

'The important bit. Here we are. Look. Suddenly Holly drops the helmet. It must land lens down because we lose picture. We've still got sound though, so I'll bring that up.'

Foaly boosted the audio signal, filtering out background noise.

'Not great quality. The mike is in the camera. So that was nose down in the dirt too.'

'Nice pea-shooter,' said a voice. Definitely human. Deep too. That usually meant big.

Root raised an eyebrow. 'Pea-shooter?'

'Slang for gun.'

'Oh.' Then the importance of that simple statement struck him. 'She drew her weapon.'

'Just wait. It gets worse.'

'I don't suppose you would consider peaceful surrender?' said a second voice. Just listening to it gave the commander shivers. 'No,' continued the voice. 'I suppose not.'

'This is bad,' said Root, his face uncharacteristically pale. 'This feels like a set-up. These two goons were waiting. How is that possible?'

Holly's voice came through the speaker then, typically brazen in the face of danger. The commander sighed. At least she was alive. It was more bad news though as the parties exchanged threats, and the second human displayed an uncommon knowledge of fairy affairs.

'He knows about the Ritual!'

'Here's the worst bit.'

Root's jaw dropped. 'The worst bit?'

Holly's voice again. This time layered with the mesmer.

'Now she has them,' crowed Root.

But apparently not. Not only did the mesmer prove ineffective, but the mysterious pair seemed to find it amusing.

'That's all there is from Holly,' noted Foaly. 'One of the Mud People messes around with the camera for a bit and then we lose everything.'

Root rubbed the creases between his eyes. 'Not much to go on. No visual, not even a name. We can't really be a hundred per cent sure that we have a situation.'

'You want proof?' asked Foaly, rewinding the tape. 'I'll give you proof.'

He ran the available video.

'Now watch this. I'm going to slow it right down. One frame per second.'

Root leaned in close to the screen, close enough to see the pixels.

'Captain Short comes in for a landing. She takes off her helmet. Bends down, presumably to pick up an acorn, and ... there!'

Foaly jabbed the pause button, freezing the picture completely. 'See anything unusual?'

The commander felt his ulcer churn into overdrive. Something had appeared in the top right-hand corner of the frame. At first glance it seemed like a shaft of light, but light from what or reflected from what?

'Can you blow that up?'

'No problem.'

Foaly cut to the relevant area, increasing it by 400 per cent. The light expanded to fill the screen.

'Oh no,' breathed Root.

There on the monitor before them, in frozen suspension, was a hypodermic dart. There could be no doubt. Captain Holly Short was missing in action. Most probably dead, but at the very least held captive by a hostile force.

'Tell me we still have the locator.'

'Yep. Strong signal. Moving north at about eighty clicks an hour.'

Root was silent for a moment, formulating his strategy.

'Go to full alert, and get Retrieval out of their bunks and back down here. Prep them for a surface shot. I want full tactical and a couple of techies. You too, Foaly. We may have to stop time on this one.'

'Ten four, Commander. You want Recon in on this?'

Root nodded. 'You bet.'

'I'll call in Captain Vein. He's our number one.'

'Oh no,' said Root. 'For a job like this, we need our very best. And that's me. I'm reactivating myself.'

Foaly was so amazed, he couldn't even formulate a smart comment.

'You're ... You're ...'

'Yes, Foaly. Don't act so surprised. I have more successful recons under my belt than any officer in history. Plus I did my basic training in Ireland. Back in the top hat and shillelagh days.'

'Yes, but that was five hundred years ago, and you were no spring bud then, not to put too fine a point on it.'

Root smiled dangerously. 'Don't worry, Foaly. I'm still running red hot. And I'll make up for my age with a really big gun. Now get a pod ready. I'm leaving on the next flare.'

Foaly did what he was told without a single quip. When the commander got that glint in his eyes, you hopped to and kept your mouth shut. But there was another reason for Foaly's silent compliance. It had just hit him that Holly could be in real trouble. Centaurs don't make many friends and Foaly was worried he might lose one of the few he had.

Artemis had anticipated some technological advances, but nothing like the treasure trove of fairy hardware spread out on the four-wheel drive's dashboard.

'Impressive,' he murmured. 'We could abort this mission right now and still make a fortune in patents.'

Artemis ran a hand-held scanner bar over the unconscious elf's wristband. He then fed the fairy characters into his PowerBook translator.

'This is a locator of some kind. No doubt this leprechaun's comrades are tracking us right now.'

Butler swallowed. 'Right now, sir?'

'It would seem so. Or at any rate they're tracking the locator -'

Artemis stopped speaking suddenly, his eyes losing focus as the electricity in his cranium sparked off another brainwave.

'Butler?'

The manservant felt his pulse quicken. He knew that tone. Something was afoot.

'Yes, Artemis?'

'That Japanese whaler. The one seized by the port authorities. Is she still tied up at the docks?'

Butler nodded. 'Yes, I believe so.'

Artemis twirled the locator's band around his index finger.

'Good. Take us down there. I believe it's time to let our diminutive friends know exactly who they're dealing with.'

Root rubber-stamped his own reactivation with remarkable speed - very unusual for LEP upper management. Generally it took months, and several mind-crushingly dull meetings, to approve any application to the Recon Squad. Luckily, Root had a bit of influence with the commander.

It felt good to be back in a field uniform and Root even managed to convince himself that the jumpsuit was no tighter around the middle than it used to be. The bulge, he rationalized, was caused by all the new equipment they jammed into these things. Personally, Root had no time for gadgetry. The only items the commander was interested in were the wings on his back and the multiphase, water-cooled, tri-barrelled blaster strapped to his hip the most powerful production handgun under the world. Old, to be sure, but it had seen Root through a dozen fire fights and it made him feel like a field officer again.

The nearest chute to Holly's position was E1:Tara. Not exactly an ideal location for a stealth mission, but with barely two hours of moon time left there was no time for an overground jaunt. If there was to be any chance of sorting out this mess before sunrise, speed was of the essence. He commandeered the E1 shuttle for his team, bumping a tour group who had apparently been queuing for two years.

'Tough nuggets,' Root growled at the holiday rep. 'And what's more, I'm shutting down all non-essential flights until the present crisis is past.'

'And when might that be?' squeaked the irate gnome, brandishing a notebook as though she were prepared to make a complaint of some kind.

Root spat out the butt of his cigar, squashing it comprehensively beneath his boot heel. The symbolism was all too obvious.

'The chutes will be opened, madam, when I feel like it,' growled the commander. 'And if you and your fluorescent uniform don't get out of my way, I'll yank your operating licence and have you thrown into the cells for obstructing an LEP officer.'

The holiday rep wilted before him and slunk back into line, wishing her uniform wasn't quite so pink.

Foaly was waiting at the pod. Serious though the moment was, he couldn't resist an amused whinny at the sight of Root's belly wobbling ever so slightly in his clinging jumpsuit.

'Are you sure about this, Commander? Generally we allow only one passenger per pod.'

'What do you mean?' snarled Root. 'There is only one ...'

Then he caught Foaly's meaningful glance at his stomach.

'Oh. Ha ha. Very amusing. Keep it up, Foaly. I have my limit, you know.'

But it was a hollow threat and they both knew it. Not only had Foaly built their communications network from scratch, but he was also a pioneer in the field of flare prediction. Without him, human technology could very easily catch up with the fairy brand.

Root strapped himself into the pod. No half-century-old crafts for the commander. This baby was fresh off the assembly line. All silver and shiny, with the new jagged fin stabilizers that were supposed to read the magma currents automatically. Foaly's innovation, of course. For a century or so his pod designs had leaned towards the futuristic - plenty of neon and rubber. Lately, however, his sensibilities had become more retrospective, replacing the gadgetry with walnut dashes and leather upholstery. Root found this old-style decor strangely comforting.

He wrapped his fingers around the joysticks and suddenly realized just how long it was since he had ridden the hotshots. Foaly noticed his discomfort.

'Don't worry, chief,' he said without the usual cynicism. 'It's like riding a unicorn. You never forget.'

Root grunted, unconvinced. 'Let's get the show on the road,' he muttered. 'Before I change my mind.'

Foaly hauled the door across until the suction ring took hold, sealing the portal with a pneumatic hiss. Root's face took on a green hue through the quartz pane. He didn't look too scary any more. Quite the opposite in fact.

Artemis was performing a little field surgery on the fairy locator. It was no mean feat to alter some of the dimensions without destroying the mechanisms. The technologies were most definitely incompatible. Imagine trying to perform open-heart surgery with a sledgehammer.

The first problem was opening the cursed thing. The screwheads defied both flathead and Phillips screwdrivers. Even Artemis's extensive set of Alien keys were unable to find

purchase in the tiny grooves. Think futuristic, Artemis told himself. Think advanced technology.

It came to him after a few moments' silent contemplation. Magnetic bolts. Obvious really. But how to construct a revolving magnetic field in the back of a four-wheel drive? Impossible. The only thing for it was to chase the screws around manually with a domestic magnet.

Artemis hunted the small magnet from its niche in the toolbox and applied both poles to the tiny screws. The negative side wiggled them slightly. It was enough to give Artemis some purchase with needlenose pliers, and he soon had the locator's panel disassembled before him.

The circuitry was minute. And not a sign of a solder bead. They must use another form of binder. Perhaps if he had time the principles of this device could be unravelled, but for now he would have to improvise. He would have to rely on the inattention of others. And if the People were anything like humans, they saw what they wanted to see.

Artemis held the locator's face up to the cab's light. It was translucent. Slightly polarized but good enough. He nudged a slew of tiny shimmering wires aside, inserting a buttonhole camera in the space. He secured the pea-sized transmitter with a dab of silicone. Crude but effective. Hopefully.

The magnetic screws refused to be coaxed back into their grooves without the proper tool, so Artemis was forced to glue them too. Messy, but it should suffice, provided the locator wasn't examined too closely. And if it was? Well, he would only lose an advantage that he never expected to have in the first place.

Butler knocked off his high beams as they entered the city limits. 'Docks coming up, Artemis,' he said over his shoulder. 'There's bound to be a Customs and Excise crew around somewhere.'

Artemis nodded. It made sense. The port was a thriving artery of illegal activity. Over fifty per cent of the country's contraband made it ashore somewhere along this half-mile stretch.

'A diversion then, Butler. Two minutes are all I need.'

The manservant nodded thoughtfully.

'The usual?'

'I don't see why not. Knock yourself out ... Or rather don't.'

Artemis blinked. That was his second joke in recent times. And his first aloud. Better take care. This was no time for frivolity.

The dockers were rolling cigarettes. It wasn't easy with fingers the size of lead bars, but they managed. And if a few strands of brown tobacco dropped to the rough flagstones, what of it? The pouches were available by the carton from a little man who didn't bother adding government tax to his prices.

Butler strolled over to the men, his eyes shadowed beneath the brim of a watch cap.

'Cold night,' he said to the assembled group.

No one replied. Policemen came in all shapes and sizes.

The big stranger persevered. 'Even work is better than standing around on a frosty one like tonight.'

One of the workmen, a bit soft in the head, couldn't help nodding in agreement. A comrade drove an elbow into his ribs.

'Still though,' continued the newcomer, 'I don't suppose you girls ever did a decent day's work in your lives.'

Again there was no reply. But this time it was because the dockers' mouths were hanging open in amazement.

'Yep, you're a pathetic-looking bunch, right enough,' went on Butler blithely. 'Oh, I've no doubt you would have passed as men during the famine. But by today's standards you're little more than a pack of blouse-wearing weaklings.'

'Arrrrgh,' said one of the dock hands. It was all he could manage.

Butler raised an eyebrow. 'Argh? Pathetic and inarticulate. Nice combination. Your mothers must be so proud.'

The stranger had crossed a sacred line. He had mentioned the men's mothers. Nothing could get him out of a beating now, even the fact that he was obviously a simpleton. Albeit a simpleton with a good vocabulary.

The men stamped out their cigarettes and spread slowly into a semi-circle. It was six against one. You had to feel sorry for them. Butler wasn't finished yet.

'Now before we get into anything, ladies, no scratching, no spitting and no tattling to mummy.'

It was the last straw. The men howled and attacked as one. If they had been paying any attention to their adversary in that moment before contact, they might have noticed that he shifted his weight to lower his centre of gravity. They might also have seen that the hands he drew out of his pockets were the size and approximate shape of spades. But no one was paying attention to Butler - too busy watching their comrades, making sure they weren't alone in the assault.

The thing about a diversion is that it has to be diverting. Big. Crude. Not Butler's style at all. He would have preferred to take these gentlemen out from 500 metres with a dart rifle. Failing that, if contact was absolutely necessary, a series of thumb jabs to the nerve cluster at the base of the neck would be his chosen modus operandi - quiet as a whisper. But that would be defeating the purpose of the exercise.

And so Butler went against his training, screaming like a demon and utilizing the most vulgar combat actions. Vulgar they may have been, but that's not to say they weren't effective. Perhaps a Shao Lin priest could have anticipated some of the more exaggerated movements,

but these men were hardly trained adversaries. In fairness, they weren't even completely sober.

Butler dropped the first with a roundhouse punch. Two more had their heads clapped together, cartoon style. The fourth was, to Butler's eternal shame, dispatched with a spinning kick. But the most ostentatious was saved for the last pair. The manservant rolled on to his back, caught them by the collars of their donkey jackets and flipped them into Dublin harbour. Big splashes, plenty of wailing. Perfect.

Two headlights poked from the black shadow of a cargo container and a government saloon screeched along the quay. As anticipated, a Customs and Excise team on stakeout. Butler grinned with grim satisfaction and ducked around the corner. He was long gone before the agents had flipped their badges or begun inquiries. Not that their interrogations would yield much. 'Big as a house' was hardly an adequate description to track him down.

By the time Butler reached the car, Artemis had already returned from his mission.

'Well done, old friend,' he commented. 'Although I'm certain your martial-arts sensei is turning in his grave. A spinning kick? How could you?'

Butler bit his tongue, reversing the four-wheel drive off the wooden works. As they crossed the overpass, he couldn't resist glancing down at the chaos he had created. The government men were hauling a sodden docker from the polluted waters.

Artemis had needed this diversion for something. But Butler knew there was no point in asking what. His employer did not share his plans with anyone until he thought the time was right. And if Artemis Fowl thought the time was right, then it usually was.

Root emerged shaking from the pod. He didn't remember it being like this in his time. Although truth be told, it had probably been an awful lot worse. Back in the shillelagh days, there were no fancy polymer harnesses, no auto thrusters and certainly no external monitors. It was just gut instinct and a touch of enchantment. In some ways Root preferred it like that. Science was taking the magic out of everything.

He stumbled down the tunnel into the terminal. As the number-one preferred destination, Tara had a fully fledged passenger lounge. Six shuttles a week came in from Haven City alone. Not on the flares, of course. Paying tourists didn't like to be jostled around quite that much, unless of course they were on an illegal jaunt to Disneyland.

The fairy fort was crammed with full-moon overnighters complaining about the shuttle suspensions. A beleaguered sprite was sheltering behind her ticket desk, besieged by angry gremlins.

'There's no point hexing me,' squealed the sprite, 'there's the elf you want right there.'

She pointed a quivering green finger at the approaching commander. The gremlin mob turned on Root, and when they saw the triple-barrelled blaster on his hip, they kept right on turning.

Root grabbed the PA stand from behind the desk, and hauled it out to the extent of its cable.

'Now hear this,' he growled, his gravelly tones echoing around the terminal. 'This is Commander Root of the LEP. We have a serious situation above ground and I would appreciate cooperation from all you civilians. First, I would like you all to stop your yapping so I can hear myself think!'

Root paused to make certain his wishes were being respected. They were.

'Secondly, I would like every single one of you, including those squawling infants, to sit down on the courtesy benches until I have gone on my way. Then you can get back to griping or stuffing your faces. Or whatever else it is civilians do.'

No one had ever accused Root of political correctness. No one was ever likely to either.

'And I want whoever's in charge to get over here. Now!'

Root tossed the stand on to the desk. A blare of whistling feedback grated on every eardrum in the building. Within fractions of a second, an out-of-breath elf/goblin hybrid was bobbing at his elbow.

'Anything we can do, Commander?'

Root nodded, twisting a thick cigar into the hole beneath his nose.

'I want you to open a tunnel straight through this place. I don't want to be bothered by Customs or Immigration. Start moving everybody below after my boys get here.'

The shuttle port director swallowed. 'Everybody?'

'Yes. That includes terminal personnel. And take everything you can carry. Full evacuation.' He stopped and glared into the director's mauve eyes. 'This is not a drill.'

'You mean -'

'Yes,' said Root, continuing down the access ramp. 'The Mud People have committed an overtly hostile act. Who knows where this is going?'

The elf/goblin combo watched as Root disappeared in a cloud of cigar smoke. An overtly hostile act? It could mean war. He punched in his accountant's number on his mobile.

'Bark? Yes. This is Nimbus. I want you to sell all my shares in the shuttle port. Yes, all of them. I have a hunch the price is about to take a severe dive.'

Captain Holly Short felt as though a sucker slug was drawing her brain out through her earhole. She tried to figure out what could possibly have caused such agony, but her faculties didn't stretch to memory just yet. Breathing and lying down were about all she could manage.

Time to attempt a word. Something short and pertinent. Help, she decided, would be the one to go for. She took a trembling breath and opened her mouth.

'Mummlp,' said her treacherous lips. No good. Incomprehensible even by a drunken gnome's standards.

What was going on here? She was flat on her back with no more strength in her body than a damp tunnel root. What could have done this to her? Holly concentrated, skirting the edge of blinding pain.

The troll? Was that it? Had the troll mauled her in that restaurant? That would explain a lot. But no. She seemed to remember something about the old country. And the Ritual. And there was something digging into her ankle.

'Hello?'

A voice. Not hers. Not even elfin.

'You awake then?'

One of the European languages. Latin. No, English. She was in England?

'I thought the dart might have killed you. Aliens' insides are different from ours. I saw that on television.'

Gibberish. Aliens, insides? What was the creature talking about?

'You look fit. Like Muchacho Maria, she's a Mexican midget wrestler.'

Holly groaned. Her gift of tongues must be on the blink. Time to see exactly what kind of craziness she was dealing with here. Focusing all her strength at the front of her head, Holly cracked open one eye. She closed it again almost immediately. There appeared to be a giant blonde fly staring down at her.

'Don't be scared,' said the fly. 'Just sunglasses.'

Holly opened both eyes this time. The creature was tapping a silver eye. No, not an eye. A lens. A mirrored lens. Like the lenses worn by the other two ... It all came back in a jolt, rushing to fill the hole in her memory like a combination lock clicking into place. She had been abducted by two humans during the Ritual. Two humans with an extraordinary knowledge of fairy affairs.

Holly tried speaking again. 'Where ... where am I?'

The human giggled delightedly, clapping her hands together. Holly noticed her nails, long and painted.

'You can speak English. What sort of accent is that? Sounds like a little bit of everything.'

Holly frowned. The girl's voice was corkscrewing right to the middle of her headache. She lifted her arm. No locator.

'Where are my things?'

The girl wagged her finger, as one might at a naughty child.

'Artemis had to take your little gun away, and all those other toys. Couldn't have you hurting yourself.'

'Artemis?'

'Artemis Fowl. This was all his idea. Everything is always his idea.'

Holly frowned. Artemis Fowl. For some reason, even the name made her shiver. It was a bad omen. Fairy intuition was never wrong.

'They'll come for me, you know,' she said, her voice rasping through dry lips. 'You don't know what you've done.'

The girl frowned. 'You're absolutely right. I have no clue what's going on. So there's no future in trying to psych me out.'

Holly frowned. It was obviously pointless playing mind games with this human. The mesmer was her only hope, but that couldn't penetrate reflective surfaces. How the devil did these humans know that? That could be worked out later. For now she had to figure a way to separate this vacuous girl from her mirrored sunglasses.

'You are a pretty human,' she said, voice dripping with honeyed flattery.

'Why, thank you ...?'

'Holly.'

'Why, thank you, Holly. I was in the local paper once. I won a competition. Miss Sugar Beet Fair Nineteen-Ninety-Nine.'

'I knew it. Natural beauty. I'll bet your eyes are spectacular.'

'So everyone tells me.' Juliet nodded. 'Lashes like clock springs.'

Holly sighed. 'If only I could see them.'

'Whyever not.'

Juliet's fingers curled around the glasses' arm. Then she hesitated.

'Maybe I shouldn't.'

'Why not? Just for a second.'

'I don't know. Artemis told me never to take these off.'

'He'd never know.'

Juliet pointed to a viewcam mounted on the wall.

'Oh, he'd find out. Artemis finds out about everything.' She leaned in close to the fairy. 'Sometimes I think he can see inside my head too.'

Holly frowned. Foiled again by this Artemis creature.

'Come on. One second. What harm could it do?'

Juliet pretended to think about it. 'None, I suppose. Unless of course you're hoping to nail me with the mesmer. Just how stupid do you think I am?'

'I have another idea,' said Holly, her tone altogether more serious. 'Why don't I get up, knock you out and take those stupid glasses off.'

Juliet laughed delightedly, as if this was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard.

'Good one, fairy girl.'

'I'm deadly serious, human.'

'Well, if you're serious,' sighed Juliet, reaching a delicate finger behind her lenses to wipe away a tear, 'two reasons. One, Artemis said that while you're in a human dwelling, you have to do what we want. And I want you to stay on that cot.'

Holly closed her eyes. Right again. Where did this group get their information?

'And two.' Juliet smiled again, but this time there was a hint of her brother in those teeth. 'Two, because I went through the same training as Butler, and I've been dying for somebody to practise my piledriver on.'

We'll see about that, human, thought Holly. Captain Short wasn't a hundred per cent yet, and there was also the small matter of the thing digging into her ankle. She thought she knew what it could be, and if she was right, then it could be the beginnings of a plan.

Commander Root had Holly's locator frequency keyed into his helmet face screen. It took Root longer than expected to reach Dublin. The modern wing rigs were more complicated than he was used to, plus he'd neglected to take refresher courses. At the right altitude, he could almost superimpose the luminous map on his visor over the actual Dublin streets below him. Almost.

'Foaly, you pompous centaur,' he barked into his mouthpiece.

'Problem, bossman?' came the tinny reply.

'Problem? You can say that again. When was the last time you updated the Dublin files?'

Root could hear sucking noises in his ear. It sounded as though Foaly was having lunch.

'Sorry, Commander. Just finishing off this carrot. Ahm ... Dublin, let's see. Seventy-five ... Eighteen seventy-five.'

'I thought so! This place is completely different. The humans have even managed to change the shape of the coastline.'

Foaly was silent for a moment. Root could just imagine him wrestling with the problem. The centaur did not like to be told that any part of his system was out of date.

'OK,' he said at last. 'Here's what I'm going to do. We have a Scope on a satellite TV bird with a footprint in Ireland.'

'I see,' muttered Root, which was basically a lie.

'I'm going to e-mail last week's sweep direct to your visor. Luckily there's a video card in all the new helmets.'

'Luckily.'

'The tricky bit will be to coordinate your flight pattern with the video feed ...'

Root had had enough. 'How long, Foaly?'

'Ahm ... Two minutes, give or take.'

'Give or take what?'

'About ten years if my calculations are off.'

'They'd better not be off then. I'll hover until we know.'

One hundred and twenty-four seconds later, Root's black and white blueprints faded out, to be replaced by full-colour daylight imaging. When Root moved it moved, and Holly's locator beacon dot moved too.

'Impressive,' said Root.

'What was that, Commander?'

'I said impressive,' shouted Root. 'No need to get a swollen head.'

The commander heard the sound of a roomful of laughter, and realized that Foaly had him on the speakers. Everyone had heard him complimenting the centaur's work. There'd be no talking to him for at least a month. But it was worth it. The video he was receiving now was bang up to date. If Captain Short was being held in a building, the computer would be able to give him 3D blueprints instantaneously. It was foolproof. Except ...

'Foaly, the beacon's gone off shore. What's going on?'

'Boat or ship, sir, I'd say at a guess.'

Root cursed himself for not thinking of it. They'd be having a right old giggle in the situation room. Of course it was a ship. Root dropped down a few hundred metres until its shadowy outline loomed through the mist. A whaler by the looks of it. Technology may have changed

over the centuries, but there was still nothing like a harpoon to slaughter the world's largest mammal.

'Captain Short is in there somewhere, Foaly. Below decks. What can you give me?'

'Nothing, sir. It's not a permanent fixture. By the time we've run down her registration, it'd be way too late.'

'What about thermal imaging?'

'No, Commander. That hull must be at least fifty years old. Very high lead content. We can't even penetrate the first layer. I'm afraid you're on your own.'

Root shook his head. 'After all the billions we've poured into your department. Remind me to slash your budget when I get back.'

'Yes, sir,' came the reply, sullen for once. Foaly did not like budget jokes.

'Just have the Retrieval Squad on full alert. I may need them at a moment's notice.'

'I will, sir.'

'You'd better. Over and out.'

Root was on his own. Truth be told, that was the way he liked it. No science. No uppity centaur whinnying in his ear. Just a fairy, his wits and maybe a touch of magic.

Root tilted his polymer wings, hugging the underside of a fogbank. There was no need to be careful. With his shield activated, he was invisible to the human eye. Even on stealth-sensitive radar he would be no more than a barely perceptible distortion. The commander swooped low to the gunwales. It was an ugly craft, this one. The smell of death and pain lingered in the blood-swabbed decks. Many noble creatures had died here, died and been dissected for a few bars of soap and some heating oil. Root shook his head. Humans were such barbarians.

Holly's beeper was flashing urgently now. She was close by. Very close. Somewhere within a 200-metre radius was the hopefully still-breathing form of Captain Short. But without blueprints he would have to navigate the belly of this ship unaided.

Root alighted gently on the deck, his boots adhering slightly to the mixture of dried soap and blubber coating the steel surface. The craft appeared to be deserted. No sentry on the gangplank, no bosun on the bridge, not a light anywhere. Still, no reason to abandon caution. Root knew from bitter experience that humans popped up when you least expected them. Once, when he was helping the Retrieval boys scrape some pod wreckage off a tunnel wall, they were spotted by a group of potholing humans. What a mess that had been. Mass hysteria, high-speed chases, group mind-wipes. The whole nine yards. Root shuddered. Nights like that could put decades on a fairy.

Keeping himself fully shielded, the commander stowed his wings in their sheath, advancing on foot across the deck. There were no other life forms showing up on his screen but, like Foaly said, the hull had a high lead content; even the paint was lead-based! The entire boat was a floating eco-hazard. The point being that there could be an entire battalion of

stormtroopers concealed below decks and his helmetcam would never pick them up. Very reassuring. Even Holly's beacon was a few shades below par, and that had a micro nuclear battery sending out the pulses. Root didn't like this. Not one bit. Keep calm, he derided himself. You're shielded. There's not a human alive that can see you now.

Root hauled open the first hatch. It swung easily enough. The commander sniffed. The Mud People had greased the hinges with whale blubber. Was there no end to their depravity?

The corridor was steeped in viscous darkness, so Root flicked down his infrared filter. OK, so sometimes technology did come in handy, but he wouldn't be telling Foaly that. The maze of pipes and grilling before him was immediately illuminated with an unnatural red light. Minutes later, he was regretting even thinking something nice about the centaur's technology. The infrared filter was messing with his depth perception and he'd whacked his head on two protruding U-bends so far.

Still no sign of life - human or fairy. Plenty of animal. Mostly rodents. And when you're just topping a metre in height yourself, a good-sized rat can be a real threat, especially since rats are one of the few breeds that can see straight through a fairy shield. Root unstrapped his blaster and set it to level three, or medium rare, as the elves in the locker room called it. He sent one of the rats scurrying away with a smoking behind as a warning to the rest. Nothing fatal, just enough to teach him not to look sideways at a fairy again in a hurry.

Root picked up his pace. This place was ideal for an ambush. He was virtually blind with his back to the only exit. A Recon nightmare. If one of his own men had pulled a stunt like this, he'd have their stripes for it. But desperate times required judicious risk-taking. That was the essence of command.

He ignored several doors to either side, following the beacon. Ten metres now. A steel hatch sealed the corridor, and Captain Short, or her corpse, lay on the other side of it.

Root put his shoulder to the door. It swung open without protest. Bad news. If a live creature was being held captive, the hatch would be locked. The commander flicked the blaster's power level to five and advanced through the hole. His weapon hummed softly. There was enough power on tap now to vaporize a bull elephant with a single blast.

No sign of Holly. No sign of anything much. He was in a refrigerated storage bay. Glittering stalactites hung from a maze of piping. Root's breath fanned before him in icy clouds. How would that look to a human? Disembodied breathing.

'Ah,' said a familiar voice. 'We have a visitor.'

Root dropped to one knee, levelling the handgun at the voice's source.

'Come to rescue your missing officer, no doubt.'

The commander blinked a bead of sweat from his eye. Sweat? At this temperature?

'Well, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place.'

The voice was tinny. Artificial. Amplified. Root checked his locator for life signs. There were none. Not in this chamber at any rate. He was being monitored somehow. Was there a camera

here somewhere, concealed in the maze of overhead plumbing, that could penetrate the fairy shield?

'Where are you? Show yourself!'

The human chuckled. It echoed unnaturally around the vast hold.

'Oh no. Not yet, my fairy friend. But soon enough. And believe me, when I do, you'll wish I hadn't.'

Root followed the voice. Keep the human talking.

'What do you want?'

'Hmm. What do I want? Again, you will know soon enough.'

There was a low crate in the centre of the hold. On it sat an attaché case. The case was open.

'Why bring me here at all?'

Root poked the case with his pistol. Nothing happened.

'I brought you here for a demonstration.'

The commander leaned over the open container. Inside, in snug foam packing, were a flat vacuum-packed package and a triple-band VHP transmitter. Resting on top was Holly's locator. Root groaned. Holly wouldn't willingly give up her equipment; no LEP officer would.

'What sort of demonstration, you demented freak?'

Again that cold chuckle.

'A demonstration of my utter commitment to my goals.'

Root should have started to worry about his own health then, but he was too busy worrying about Holly's.

'If you've harmed one tip of my officer's pointy ears ...'

'Your officer? Oh, we have management. How privileged. All the better to make my point.'

Alarm bells went off in Root's head.

'Your point?'

The voice emanating from the aluminium speaker grid was as serious as nuclear winter.

'My point, little fairy man, is that I am not someone to be trifled with. Now, if you would please observe the package.'

The commander duly observed. It was a nondescript enough shape. Flat, like a slab of putty, or ... Oh no.

Beneath the sealant, a red light flicked on.

'Fly, little fairy,' said the voice. 'And tell your friends Artemis Fowl the Second says hello.'

Beside the red light, green symbols began to click through a routine. Root recognized them from his human studies class back in the Academy. They were ... numbers. Going backwards. A countdown!

'D'Arvit!' growled Root. (There is no point translating that word as it would have to be censored.)

He turned and fled up the corridor, Artemis Fowl's mocking tones carrying down the metal funnel.

'Three,' said the human. 'Two ...'

'D'Arvit,' repeated Root.

The corridor seemed much longer now. A sliver of starry sky peeked through a wedge of open door. Root activated his wings. This would take some fancy flying. The Hummingbird's span was barely narrower than the ship's corridor.

'One.'

Sparks flew as the electronic wings scraped a protruding pipe. Root cartwheeled, righting himself at MACH 1.

'Zero ...' said the voice. 'Boom!'

Inside the vacuum-packed package, a detonator sparked, igniting a kilogram of pure Semtex. The white-hot reaction devoured the surrounding oxygen in a nanosecond and surged down the path of least resistance, which was, of course, immediately after LEP Commander Root.

Root dropped his visor, opening the throttle to maximum. The door was metres away now. It was just a matter of what reached it first - the fairy or the fireball.

He made it. Barely. He could feel the explosion rattling his torso as he threw himself into a reverse loop. Flames latched on to his jumpsuit, licking along his legs. Root continued his manoeuvre, crashing directly into the icy water. He broke the surface swearing.

Above him, the whaler had been totally consumed by noxious flames.

'Commander,' came a voice in his earpiece. It was Foaly. He was back in range.

'Commander. What's your status?'

Root lifted free of the water's grip.

'My status, Foaly, is extremely annoyed. Get on your computers. I want to know everything there is to know about one Artemis Fowl, and I want to know it before I get back to base.'

'Yessir, Commander. Right away.'

No wisecrack. Even Foaly realized that this was not the time.

Root hovered at 300 metres. Below him the blazing whaler drew emergency vehicles like moths to a light. He dusted charred threads from his elbows. There will be a reckoning for this Artemis Fowl, he vowed. Count on it.

CHAPTER 6: SIEGE

ARTEMIS leaned back in the study's leather swivel chair, smiling over steepled fingers. Perfect. That little explosion should cure those fairies of their cavalier attitude. Plus there was one less whaler in the world. Artemis Fowl did not like whalers. There were less objectionable ways to produce oil by-products.

The pinhole camera concealed in the locator had worked perfectly. With its high-resolution images he had picked out the fairy's tell-tale breath crystals.

Artemis consulted the basement surveillance monitor. His captive was sitting on the cot now, head in hands. Artemis frowned. He hadn't expected the fairy to appear so ... human. Until now, they had merely been quarry. Animals to be hunted. But now, seeing one like this, in obvious discomfort, it changed things.

Artemis put the computer to sleep and crossed to the main doors. Time for a little chat with their guest. Just as his fingers alighted on the brass handles, the door flew open before him. Juliet appeared in the doorway, cheeks flushed from haste.

'Artemis,' she gasped. 'Your mother. She ...'

Artemis felt a lead ball drop in his stomach.

'Yes?'

'Well, she says, Artemis ... Artemis, that your ...'

'Yes, Juliet. For heaven's sake, what is it?'

Juliet placed both hands over her mouth, composing herself. After several seconds she parted spangled nails, speaking through her fingers.

'It's your father, sir. Artemis Senior. Madam Fowl says he's come back!'

For a split second, Artemis could have sworn his heart had stopped. Father? Back? Was it possible? Of course he'd always believed his father was alive. But lately, since he'd hatched this fairy scheme, it was almost as if his father had shifted to the back of his mind. Artemis felt guilt churn his stomach. He had given up. Given up on his own father.

'Did you see him, Juliet? With your own eyes?'

The girl shook her head.

'No, Artemis, sir. I just heard voices. In the bedroom. But she won't let me through the door. Not for anything. Not even with a hot drink.'

Artemis calculated. They had returned barely an hour since. His father could have slipped past Juliet. It was possible. Just possible. He glanced at his watch, synchronized with Greenwich Mean Time by constantly updated radio signals. Three a.m. Time was ticking on. His entire plan depended on the fairies making their next move before daylight.

Artemis started. He was doing it again, pushing family to one side. What was he becoming? His father was the priority here, not some money-making scheme.

Juliet was still in the doorway, watching him with those enormous blue eyes. She was waiting for him to make a decision, as he always did. And for once, there was indecision scrawled across his pale features.

'Very well,' he mumbled eventually. 'I had better go up there immediately.'

Artemis brushed past the girl, taking the steps two at a time. His mother's room was two flights up, a converted attic space.

He hesitated at the door. What would he say if it was his father miraculously returned? What would he do? It was ridiculous dithering about it. Impossible to predict. He knocked lightly.

'Mother?'

No response, but he thought he heard a giggle and was instantly transported into the past. Initially this room had been his parents' lounge. They would sit on the chaise longue for hours, tittering like school children, feeding the pigeons or watching the ships sailing past on Dublin sound. When Artemis Senior had disappeared, Angeline Fowl had become more and more attached to the space, eventually refusing to leave altogether.

'Mother? Are you all right?'

Muffled voices from within. Conspiratorial whispers.

'Mother. I'm coming in.'

'Wait a moment. Timmy, stop it, you beast. We have company.'

Timmy? Artemis's heart thumped like a snare drum in his chest. Timmy, her pet name for his father. Timmy and Arty. The two men in her life. He could wait no longer. Artemis burst through the double doors.

His first impression was light. Mother had the lamps on. A good sign surely. Artemis knew where his mother would be. He knew exactly where to look. But he couldn't. What if ... What if ...

'Yes, can we help you?'

Artemis turned, his eyes still downcast. 'It's me.'

His mother laughed. Airy and carefree. 'I can see it's you, Papa. Can't you even give your boy one night off? It is our honeymoon after all.'

Artemis knew then. It was just an escalation of her madness. Papa? Angeline thought Artemis was his own grandfather. Dead over ten years. He raised his gaze slowly.

His mother was seated on the chaise longue, resplendent in her own wedding dress, face clumsily coated with make-up. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Beside her was a facsimile of his father, constructed from the morning suit he'd worn on that glorious day in Christchurch Cathedral fourteen years ago. The clothes were padded with tissue, and atop the dress shirt was a stuffed pillowcase with lipstick features. It was almost funny. Artemis choked back a sob, his hopes vanishing like a summer rainbow.

'What do you say, Papa?' said Angeline in a deep bass, nodding the pillow like a ventriloquist manipulating her dummy. 'One night off for your boy, eh?'

Artemis nodded. What else could he do?

'One night then. Take tomorrow too. Be happy.'

Angeline's face radiated honest joy. She sprang from the couch, embracing her unrecognized son.

'Thank you, Papa. Thank you.'

Artemis returned the embrace, though it felt like cheating.

'You're welcome, Mo Angeline. Now, I must be off. Business to attend to.'

His mother settled beside her imitation husband.

'Yes, Papa. You go, don't worry, we can keep ourselves amused.'

Artemis left. He didn't look back. There were things to be done. Fairies to be extorted. He had no time for his mother's fantasy world.

Captain Holly Short was holding her head in her hands. One hand to be precise. The other was scrabbling down the side of her boot, on the camera's blindside. In actuality her head was crystal clear, but it would do no harm for the enemy to believe her still out of action. Perhaps they would underestimate her. And that would be the last mistake they ever made.

Holly's fingers closed around the object that had been digging into her ankle. She knew immediately by its contours what was concealed there. The acorn! It must have slipped into her boot during all the commotion by the oak. This could be a vital development. All she needed was a small patch of earth, then her powers would be restored.

Holly glanced surreptitiously around the cell. Fresh concrete by the looks of it. Not a single crack or flaky corner. Nowhere to bury her secret weapon. Holly stood tentatively, trying out her legs for stability. Not too bad, a bit shaky around the knees, but otherwise sound enough. She crossed to the wall, pressing her cheek and palms to the smooth surface. The concrete was fresh all right, very recent. Still damp in patches. Obviously her prison had been specially prepared.

'Looking for something?' said a voice. A cold, heartless voice.

Holly reared back from the wall. The human boy was standing not two metres from her, his eyes hidden behind mirrored glasses. He had entered the room without a sound. Extraordinary.

'Sit, please.'

Holly did not want to sit please. What she wanted to do was incapacitate this insolent pup with her elbow and use his miserable hide for leverage. Artemis could see it in her eyes. It amused him.

'Getting ideas, are we, Captain Short?'

Holly bared her teeth, it was answer enough.

'We are both fully aware of the rules here, Captain. This is my house. You must abide by my wishes. Your laws, not mine. Obviously my wishes do not include bodily harm to myself, or you attempting to leave this house.'

It hit Holly then.

'How do you know my -'

'Your name? Your rank?' Artemis smiled, though there was no joy in it. 'If you will wear a name tag ...'

Holly's hand unconsciously covered the silver tag on her suit.

'But that's written in -'

'Gnommish. I know. I happen to be fluent. As is everyone in my network.'

Holly was silent for a moment, processing this momentous revelation.

'Fowl,' she said with feeling, 'you have no idea what you've done. Bringing the worlds together like this could mean disaster for us all.'

Artemis shrugged. 'I am not concerned with us all, just myself. And believe me, I shall be perfectly fine. Now, sit, please.'

Holly sat, never taking her hazel eyes from the diminutive monster before her.

'So what is this master plan, Fowl? Let me guess: world domination?'

'Nothing so melodramatic,' chuckled Artemis. 'Just riches.'

'A thief!' spat Holly. 'You're just a thief!'

Annoyance flashed across Artemis's features, only to be replaced by his customary sardonic grin.

'Yes. A thief if you like. Hardly just a thief though. The world's first cross-species thief.'

Captain Short snorted. 'First cross-species thief! Mud People have been stealing from us for millennia. Why do you think we live underground?'

'True. But I will be first to successfully separate a fairy from its gold.'

'Gold? Gold? Human idiot. You don't honestly believe that crock-of-gold nonsense. Some things aren't true, you know.'

Holly threw her head back and laughed.

Artemis checked his nails patiently, waiting for her to finish. When the gales had finally subsided, he shook his index finger.

'You are right to laugh, Captain Short. For a while there, I did believe in all that under-the-rainbow crock-of-gold blarney, but now I know better. Now I know about the hostage fund.'

Holly struggled to keep her face under control.

'What hostage fund?'

'Oh, come now, Captain. Why bother with the charade? You told me about it yourself.'

'I-I told you!' stammered Holly. 'Ridiculous!'

'Look at your arm.'

Holly rolled up her right sleeve. There was a small cotton pad taped to the vein.

'That's where we administered the sodium pentathol. Commonly known as truth serum. You sang like a bird.'

Holly knew it was true. How else could he know?

'You're mad!'

Artemis nodded indulgently. 'If I win, I'm a prodigy. If I lose then I'm mad. That's the way history is written.'

Of course, there had been no sodium pentathol, just a harmless prick with a sterilized needle. Artemis would not risk causing brain damage to his meal ticket, but nor could he afford to reveal the Book as the source of his information. Better to let the hostage believe that she had betrayed her own people. It would lower her morale, making her more susceptible to his mind games. Still, the ruse disturbed him. It was undeniably cruel. How far was he prepared to go for this gold? He didn't know, and wouldn't until the time came.

Holly slumped, momentarily defeated by this latest development. She had talked. Revealed sacred secrets. Even if she did manage to escape, she would be banished to some freezing tunnel under the Arctic Circle.

'This isn't over, Fowl,' she said at last. 'We have powers you can't possibly know about. It would take days to describe them all.'

The infuriating boy laughed again. 'How long do you think you've been here?'

Holly groaned; she knew what was coming. 'A few hours?'

Artemis shook his head. 'Three days,' he lied. 'We've had you on a drip for over sixty hours ... until you told us everything we needed to know.'

Even as the words came out, Artemis felt guilty. These mind games were having an obvious effect on Holly, destroying her from the inside out. Was there really a need for this?

'Three days? You could have killed me. What kind of ...'

And it was that speechless quality that sent the doubt shooting through Artemis's brain. The fairy thought him so evil, she couldn't even find the words.

Holly pulled herself together.

'Well then, Master Fowl,' she spat, heavy on the contempt, 'if you know so much about us, then you know what happens when they locate me.'

Artemis nodded absently. 'Oh yes, I know. In fact, I'm counting on it.'

It was Holly's turn to grin.

'Oh really. Tell me, boy, have you ever met a troll?'

For the first time, the human's confidence dropped a notch.

'No. Never a troll.'

Holly showed more teeth.

'You will, Fowl. You will. And I hope I'm there to see it.'

The LEP had established a surface Op's HQ at E1:Tara.

'Well?' said Root, slapping at a paramedic gremlin who was applying burn salve to his forehead. 'Leave it. The magic will sort me out soon enough.'

'Well what?' replied Foaly.

'Don't give me any of your lip today, Foaly, because today is not one of those Oh-I'm-so-impressed-with-the-pony's-technology days. Tell me what you found on the human.'

Foaly scowled, securing his foil hat on his head. He flipped the top on a wafer-thin laptop.

'I hacked into Interpol. Not too difficult, I can tell you. They might as well have put out a welcome mat ...'

Root drummed his fingers on the conference table. 'Get on with it.'

'Right. Fowl. Ten-gigabyte file. In paper terms that's half a library.'

The commander whistled. 'That's one busy human.'

'Family,' corrected Foaly. 'The Fowls have been subverting justice for generations. Racketeering, smuggling, armed robbery. Mostly corporate crime last century.'

'So do we have a location?'

'That was the easy bit. Fowl Manor. On a two-hundred-acre estate on the outskirts of Dublin. Fowl Manor is only about twenty clicks from our current location.'

Root chewed his bottom lip.

'Only twenty? That means we could make it before first light.'

'Yep. Sort out this whole mess before it gets out of hand in the rays of the sun.'

The commander nodded. This was their first break. Fairies had not operated in natural light for centuries. Even when they had lived above ground, they were essentially night creatures. The sun diluted their magic like bleaching a photograph. If they had to wait another day before sending in a strike force, who knew what damage Fowl could achieve?

It was even possible that this whole affair was media-oriented, and by tomorrow evening Captain Short's face would be on the cover of every publication on the planet. Root shuddered. That would spell the end of everything, unless the Mud People had learned to coexist with other species. And if history had taught him any lessons it was that humans couldn't get along with anyone, even themselves.

'Right. Everyone, lock and load. V flight pattern. Establish a perimeter inside the Manor grounds.'

The Retrieval Squad roared military-type affirmatives, coaxing as many metallic noises from their weapons as possible.

'Foaly, round up the techies. Follow us in the shuttle. And bring the big dishes. We'll shut down the entire estate, give ourselves a bit of breathing room.'

'One thing, Commander,' mused Foaly.

'Yes?' said Root impatiently.

'Why did this human tell us who he was? He must have known we could find him.'

Root shrugged. 'Maybe he's not as clever as he thinks he is.'

'No. I don't think that's it. I don't think that's it at all. I think he's been one step ahead of us all the way, and this is no different.'

'I don't have time for theorizing now, Foaly. First light is approaching.'

'One more thing, Commander.'

'Is this important?'

'Yes, I think it is.'

'Well?'

Foaly tapped a key on his laptop, scrolling through Artemis's vital statistics.

'This criminal mastermind, the one behind this elaborate scheme ...'

'Yes? What about him?'

Foaly looked up, an almost admiring look in his golden eyes.

'Well, he's only twelve years old. And that's young, even for a human.'

Root snorted, jacking a new battery into his tri-barrelled blaster.

'Too much damned TV. Thinks he's Sherlock Holmes.'

'That's Professor Moriarty,' corrected Foaly.

'Holmes, Moriarty, they both look the same with the flesh scorched off their skulls.'

And with that elegant parting riposte, Root followed his squad into the night air.

The Retrieval Squad adopted the V goose formation with Root on point. They flew southwest, following the video feed e-mailed to their helmets. Foaly had even marked Fowl Manor with a red dot. Idiot-proof, he'd muttered into his mouthpiece, just loud enough for the commander to hear him.

The centrepiece of the Fowl estate was a renovated late-medieval/early-modern castle, built by Lord Hugh Fowl in the fifteenth century.

The Fowls had held on to Fowl Manor over the years, surviving war, civil unrest and several tax audits. Artemis did not intend to be the one to lose it.

The estate was ringed by a five-metre crenellated stone wall, complete with the original guard towers and walkways. The Retrieval Squad put down just inside the boundary and began an immediate scan for possible hostiles.

'Twenty metres apart,' instructed Root. 'Sweep the area. Check in every sixty seconds. Clear?'

Retrieval nodded. Of course it was clear. They were professionals.

Lieutenant Gudgeon, Retrieval Squad's leader, climbed a guard tower.

'You know what we should do, Julius?'

He and Root had been in the Academy together, brought up in the same tunnel. Gudgeon was one of perhaps five fairies who called Root by his first name.

'I know what you think we should do.'

'We should blast the whole place.'

'What a surprise.'

'The cleanest way. One blue rinse and our losses are minimum.'

Blue rinse was the slang term for the devastating biological bomb used on rare occasions by the force. The clever thing about a bio-bomb was that it destroyed only living tissue. The landscape was unchanged.

'That minimum loss you're talking about happens to be one of my officers.'

'Oh yes,' tutted Gudgeon. 'A female Recon officer. The test case. Well, I don't think you'll have any problem justifying a tactical solution.'

Root's face took on that familiar purple hue.

'The best thing you can do right now is stay out of my way, or else I may be forced to ram that blue rinse straight into that morass you call a brain.'

Gudgeon was unperturbed. 'Insulting me doesn't change the facts, Julius. You know what the Book says. We cannot under any circumstances allow the Lower Elements to be compromised. One time-stop is all you get, after that ...'

The lieutenant didn't finish his statement. He didn't have to.

'I know what the Book says,' snapped Root. 'I just wish you weren't so gung-ho about it. If I didn't know you better, I'd say there was some human blood in you.'

'There's no call for that,' pouted Gudgeon. 'I'm only doing my job.'

'Point taken,' conceded the commander. 'I'm sorry.'

You didn't often hear Root apologizing, but then it had been a deeply offensive insult.

Butler was on monitors.

'Anything?' asked Artemis.

Butler started; he hadn't heard the young master come in.

'No. Nothing. Once or twice I thought I saw a flicker, but it turned out to be nothing.'

'Nothing is nothing,' commented Artemis cryptically. 'Use the new camera.'

Butler nodded. Only last month, Master Fowl had purchased a cine-camera over the Internet. Two thousand frames a second, recently developed by Industrial Light and Magic for specialized nature shoots, hummingbird wings and such. It processed images faster than the human eye could. Artemis had had it installed behind a cherub over the main entrance.

Butler activated the joypad.

'Where?'

'Try the avenue. I have a feeling visitors are on the way.'

The manservant manipulated the toothpick-sized stick with his massive fingers. A live image sprang into life on the digital monitor.

'Nothing,' muttered Butler. 'Quiet as the grave.'

Artemis pointed to the control desk.

'Freeze it.'

Butler nearly queried the order. Nearly. Instead he held his tongue and pressed the pad. On screen, the cherry trees froze, blossoms trapped in mid-air. More importantly, a dozen or so black-clad figures suddenly appeared on the avenue.

'What!' exclaimed Butler. 'Where did they spring from?'

'They're shielded,' explained Artemis. 'Vibrating at high speed. Too fast for the human eye to follow ...'

'But not for the camera,' nodded Butler. Master Artemis. Always two steps ahead. 'If only I could carry it around with me.'

'If only. But we do have the next best thing ...'

Artemis lifted a headset gingerly from the workbench. It was the remains of Holly's helmet. Obviously, trying to cram Butler's head into the original helmet would be like trying to fit a potato into a thimble. Only the visor and control buttons were intact. Straps from a hard hat had been jury-rigged to fit the manservant's cranium.

'This thing is equipped with several filters. It stands to reason that one of them is anti-shield. Let's try it out, shall we?'

Artemis placed the set over Butler's ears.

'Obviously with your eye span, there are going to be blind spots, but that shouldn't hamper you unduly. Now, run the camera.'

Butler set the camera rolling again, while Artemis slotted down one filter after another.

'Now?'

'No.'

'Now ..."

'Everything's gone red. Ultraviolet. No fairies.'

'Now?'

'No. Polaroid, I think.'

'Last one.'

Butler smiled. A shark that's spotted a bare behind.

'Gotten.'

Butler was seeing the world as it was, complete with LEPretrieval team sweeping the avenue.

'Hmm,' said Artemis. 'Strobe variation, I would guess. Very high frequency.'

'I see,' fibbed Butler.

'Metaphorically or literally?' smiled his employer.

'Exactly.'

Artemis shook himself. More jokes. Next thing he'd be wearing clown shoes and turning cartwheels in the main hall.

'Very well, Butler. Time for you to do what you do best. We appear to have intruders in the grounds ...'

Butler stood. No further instructions were necessary. He tightened the hard-hat straps, striding brusquely to the door.

'Oh, and Butler.'

'Yes, Artemis?'

'I prefer scared to dead. If possible.'

Butler nodded. If possible.

LEPretrieval One were the best and the brightest. It was every little fairy's dream that one day he would grow up to don the stealth-black jumpsuit of the Retrieval commandos. These were the elite. Trouble was their middle name. In the case of Captain Kelp, Trouble was actually his first name. He'd insisted on it at his manhood ceremony, having just been accepted into the Academy.

Trouble led his team down the sweeping avenue. As usual, he took the point position himself, determined to be the first into the fray if, as he fervently hoped, a fray developed.

'Check in,' he whispered into the mike that wound snake-like from his helmet.

'Negative on one.'

'Nothing, Captain.'

'A big negatori, Trouble.'

Captain Kelp winced.

'We're in the field, Corporal. Follow procedure.'

'But Mummy said!'

'I don't care what Mummy said, Corporal! Rank is rank! You will refer to me as Captain Kelp.'

'Yessir, Captain,' sulked the corporal. 'But don't ask me to iron your tunic any more.'

Trouble zeroed in on his brother's channel, shutting out the rest of the squad.

'Shut up about Mummy, will you? And the ironing. You're only on this mission because I requested you! Now start acting like a professional or get back to the perimeter!'

'OK, Trubs.'

'Trouble!' shouted Captain Kelp. 'It's Trouble. Not Trubs, or Trub. Trouble! OK?'

'OK. Trouble. Mummy's right. You're only a baby.' Swearing very unprofessionally, Captain Kelp switched his headset back to the open channel. He was just in time to hear an unusual sound. 'Arrkk.'

'What was that?'

'What?'

'Dunno.'

'Nothing, Captain.'

But Trouble had done a Sound Recognition in-service for his captain's exam, and he was pretty sure the 'Arrkk' had been caused by someone getting a chop across the windpipe. More than likely his brother had walked into a shrub.

'Grub? Are you all right?'

'That's Corporal Grub to you.'

Kelp viciously kicked a daisy.

'Check in. Sound off in sequence.'

'One, OK.'

'Two, fine.'

'Three, bored but alive.'

'Five approaching west wing.'

Kelp froze. 'Wait. Four? You there, Four? What's your situation?'

'.....' Nothing except static.

'Right. Four is down. Possibly an equipment malfunction. Still, we can't afford to take any chances. Regroup by the main door.'

Retrieval One crept together, making slightly less noise than a silk spider. Kelp did a quick head count. Eleven. One short of a full complement. Four was probably wandering around the rose bushes, wondering why nobody was talking to him.

Then Trouble noticed two things - one, a pair of black boots was sticking out of a shrub beside the door, and two, there was a massive human standing in the doorway. The figure was cradling a very nasty-looking gun in the crook of his arm.

'Go silent,' whispered Kelp, and immediately eleven full-face visors slid down to seal in the sounds of his squad's breathing and communications.

'Now, nobody panic. I think I can trace the sequence of events here. Four is skulking around outside the door. The Mud Man opens it. Four gets a whack on the noggin and lands in the bushes. No problem. Our cover is intact. Repeat intact. So no itchy fingers, please. Grub ... Sorry, Corporal Kelp, check Four's vitals. The rest of you make a hole and keep it quiet.'

The squad stepped back carefully until they were standing on the manicured grassy verge. The figure before them was indeed impressive, without doubt the biggest human any of them had ever seen.

'D'Arvit,' breathed Two.

'Maintain radio silence, except in emergencies,' ordered Kelp.' Swearing is hardly an emergency.' Secretly, however, he concurred with the sentiment. This was one time he was glad to be shielded. That man looked as if he could squash half a dozen fairies in one massive fist.

Grub returned to his slot. 'Four is stable. Concussed, I'd guess. But otherwise OK. His shield's off though, so I stuffed him in the bushes.'

'Well done, Corporal. Good thinking.'

The last thing they needed was for Four's boots to be spotted.

The man moved, lumbering casually along the path. He may have glanced left or right, it was difficult to tell beneath the hood pulled over his eyes. Odd for a human to wear a hood on such a fine night.

'Safety catches off,' ordered Trouble.

He imagined his men rolling their eyes. Like they hadn't had their safeties off for the last half an hour. Still, you had to go by the book, in case of a tribunal later on. There was a time when Retrieval blasted first and answered questions never. But not any more. Now there was always some do-gooder civilian banging on about civil rights. Even for humans, would you believe it?

The man mountain stopped, right in the middle of the squad. If he had been able to see them, it would be the perfect tactical position. Their own firearms were virtually useless, as they would probably do more damage to each other than the human.

Fortunately the entire squad was invisible, with the exception of Four, who was safely secreted in what appeared to be a rhododendron.

'Buzz batons. Fire 'em up.'

Just in case. No harm in being cautious.

And when the LEP officers were switching weapons, right at that moment when their hands were fumbling with holsters, that's when the Mud Man spoke.

'Evening, gentlemen,' he said, sweeping back his hood.

Funny that, thought Trouble. It was almost as if ... Then he saw the makeshift goggles.

'Cover!' he screamed. 'Cover!'

But it was too late. No option but to stand and fight. And that was no option at all.

Butler could have taken them from the parapet. One at a time with the ivory hunter's rifle. But that wasn't the plan. This was all about making an impression. Sending a message. It was standard procedure with any police force in the world to send in the cannon fodder first before opening negotiations. It was almost expected that they would meet with resistance, and Butler was happy to oblige.

He peeked out through the letter box and, oh happy coincidence, there was a pair of goggled eyes peeking right back at him. It was just too fortuitous to pass up.

'Bed time,' said Butler, heaving the door with a mighty shoulder. The fairy flew several metres before alighting in the shrubbery. Juliet would be devastated. She loved rhododendrons. One down. Several to go.

Butler pulled up the peaked hood on his field jacket, stepping into the porch. There they were, spread out like a squadron of Action Men. If not for the array of very proficient-looking weaponry hanging from each belt, it would have been almost comical.

Sliding his finger casually under the trigger guard, Butler strode into their midst. The bulky one at two o'clock was giving the orders. You could tell from the heads angled his way.

The leader gave a command and the squad switched to close-quarters weapons. It made sense, they'd only cut themselves to pieces with firearms. Time for action.

'Evening, gentlemen,' Butler said. He couldn't help it, and it was worth it for that one moment of consternation. Then his gun was up and blazing.

Captain Kelp was the first casualty, a titanium-tipped dart puncturing the neck of his suit. He went down sluggishly, as though the air had turned to water. Two more of the squad were dropped before they had any idea what was going on.

It must be quite traumatic, thought Butler dispassionately, to lose an advantage that you've held for centuries.

By now, the remains of Retrieval One had their buzz batons fired up and raised. But they made the mistake of hanging back, waiting for a command that was not forthcoming. This gave Butler an opportunity to take the fight to them. As if he needed another advantage.

Even so, for a second the manservant hesitated. These beings were so small. Like children. Then Grub clipped him on the elbow with his buzz baton and 1,000 volts spread across Butler's chest. All sympathy for the little people vanished instantly.

Butler grabbed the offending baton, swinging weapon and bearer like a set of bolas. Grub squealed as he was released, his new-found momentum carrying him directly into three of his comrades.

Butler continued the swinging motion, driving punishing punches into the chests of two more fairies. Another clambered on to his back, stinging him repeatedly with the baton. Butler fell on him. Something cracked and the stinging stopped.

Suddenly there was a barrel under his chin. One of Retrieval had managed to get his weapon cocked.

'Freeze, Mud Boy,' droned a helmet-filtered voice. It was a serious-looking gun, liquid coolant bubbled along its length. 'Just give me a reason.'

Butler rolled his eyes. Different race, same macho clichés. He slapped the fairy open-handed. To the little man it must have been like the sky falling on his head.

'That reason enough for you?'

Butler scrambled to his feet. Fairy bodies were scattered around him in various stages of shock and unconsciousness. Scared definitely. Dead, probably not. Mission accomplished.

One little chap was faking though. You could tell by the way his tiny knees knocked together. Butler picked him up by the neck, finger and thumb easily meeting around the back.

'Name?'

'G-Grub ... er, I mean Corporal Kelp.'

'Well, Corporal, you tell your commander that the next time I see armed forces coming in here, they'll be picked off by sniper fire. No darts either. Armour-piercing bullets.'

'Yessir. Sniper fire. Got it. Seems fair.'

'Good. You are, however, permitted to remove your injured.'

'Most generous of you.'

'But if I see so much as the twinkle of a weapon on any of the medics, I might be tempted to detonate a few of the mines I have planted in the grounds.'

Grub swallowed, his pallor increasing behind the visor.

'Unarmed medics. Crystal clear.'

Butler set the fairy down, brushing his tunic with massive fingers.

'Now. Final thing. Listening?'

Furious nods.

'I want a negotiator. Someone who can make decisions. Not some no-ranker who has to run off back to base after every demand. Understood?'

'Fine. That is, I'm sure it will be fine. Unfortunately I'm one of those no-rankers. So, you see, I can't actually guarantee it will be fine ...'

Butler was sorely tempted to drop-kick this little fellow back to his camp.

'Very well. I understand. Just ... shut up!'

Grub almost agreed, then he clamped his mouth shut and nodded.

'Good. Now, before you go, collect all weapons and helmets and make a little pile right there.'

Grub took a deep breath. Ah well, may as well go out a hero.

'I can't do that.'

'Oh, really? And why not?'

Grub drew himself up to his full height. 'An LEP officer never relinquishes his weapon.'

Butler nodded. 'Fair enough. Thought I'd ask. Off you go then.'

Hardly able to believe his luck, Grub scurried back towards the command tower. He was the last fairy standing. Trouble was snoring in the gravel but he, Grub Kelp, had faced down the Mud Monster. Wait until Mummy heard about this.

Holly sat on the edge of her bed, fingers curled around the metal base. She lifted slowly, taking the weight on her arms. The strain threatened to pop her elbows from their sockets. She held it for a second, and then slammed the frame into the concrete. A satisfying cloud of dust and splinters swirled around her knees.

'Good,' she grunted.

Holly eyed the camera. Doubtless they were watching her. No time to waste. She flexed her fingers, repeating the manoeuvre again and again, until the steel base left deep weals in her finger joints. With each impact more and more splinters popped from the fresh floor.

After several moments, the cell door burst open and Juliet fell into the room.

'What are you doing?' she panted. 'Trying to knock the house down?'

'I'm hungry!' shouted Holly. 'And I'm fed up waving at that stupid camera. Don't you feed your prisoners around here? I want some food!'

Juliet's fingers curled into a fist. Artemis had warned her to be civil, but there was a limit.

'No need to get your knick ... or whatever in a twist. So what do you fairies eat?'

'Got any dolphin?' Holly asked sarcastically.

Juliet shuddered. 'No, I don't, you beast!'

'Fruit then. Or vegetables. Make sure they're washed. I don't want any of your chemical poisons in my blood.'

'Ha ha, you're a riot, you are. Don't worry, all our produce is grown naturally.' Juliet paused on her way to the door. 'And don't you go forgetting the rules. No trying to escape from the house. And there's no need to break up the furniture either. Don't make me demonstrate my full nelson.'

As soon as Juliet's footsteps had faded, Holly began smashing the bed into the concrete. That was the thing about fairy bonds. The instructions had to be given eye to eye, and they had to be very precise. Just saying there was no need to do a thing wasn't specifically forbidding an elf to do it. And another thing, Holly had no intention of escaping from the house. That wasn't to say that she didn't mean to get out of her cell.

Artemis had added yet another monitor to the bank. This one was linked to a camera in Angeline Fowl's attic room. He spared a moment to check on his mother. Sometimes it bothered him having a camera in her room; it seemed almost like spying. But it was for her own good. There was always the danger that she could hurt herself. At the moment she was

sleeping peacefully, having swallowed the sleeping pill that Juliet had left on her tray. All part of the plan. A vital part, as it happened.

Butler entered the control room. He was clutching a fistful of fairy hardware and rubbing his neck.

'Tricky little blighters.'

Artemis looked up from the monitor bank.

'Any problems?'

'Nothing major. These little batons pack quite a punch though. How's our prisoner?'

'Fine. Juliet is getting her something to eat. I'm afraid Captain Short is going a bit stir-crazy.'

On the screen, Holly was smashing her cot into the concrete.

'It's understandable,' noted the manservant. 'Imagine her frustration. It's not as if she can tunnel her way out.'

Artemis smiled. 'No. The entire estate is built on a bed of limestone. Not even a dwarf could tunnel his way out of here. Or in.'

Wrong, as it happened. Dead wrong. A landmark moment for Artemis Fowl.

The LEP had procedures for emergencies like this one. Admittedly these did not include the Retrieval Squad getting hammered by a lone enemy. Still, that just made the next step all the more urgent, especially with the faintest of orange tinges creeping into the sky.

'Are we good to go?' roared Root into his mike, as though it wasn't whisper-sensitive.

Good to go, thought Foaly, busy wiring the last dish on a watchtower. These military types and their catchphrases. Good to go, lock and load, I don't know but I've been told. So insecure.

Aloud he said, 'No need to shout, Commander. These headsets could pick up a spider scratching in Madagascar.'

'And is there a spider scratching in Madagascar?'

'Well ... I don't know. They can't really -'

'Well, stop changing the subject, Foaly, and answer the question!'

The centaur scowled. The commander took everything so literally. He plugged the dish's modem lead into his laptop.

'OK. We're ... good to go.'

'About time too. Right, flip the switch.'

For the third time in as many moments, Foaly gritted his horsy teeth. He was indeed the stereotypical unappreciated genius. Flick the switch, if you don't mind. Root didn't have the cranial capacity to appreciate what he was trying to do here.

Stopping time wasn't just a matter of pressing the on button: there was a series of delicate procedures that had to be performed with utmost precision. Otherwise the stop zone could end up as just so much ash and radioactive slop.

While it was true that fairies had been stopping time for millennia, these days, with satellite communication and the Internet, humans were liable to notice if a zone just dropped out of time for a couple of hours. There was an age when you could throw a blanket stoppage over a whole country and the Mud People would simply think the gods were angry. But not any more. Nowadays the humans had instruments for measuring anything, so if there was any time-stopping to be done, it had better be fine-tuned and precise.

In the old days, five elfin warlocks would form a pentagram around the target and spread a magic shield over it, temporarily stopping time inside the enchanted enclosure.

This was fine as far as it went, provided the warlocks didn't have to use the bathroom. Many a siege was lost because an elf had one glass of wine too many. Warlocks tire quickly too, and their arms get sore. On a good day, you had maybe an hour and a half, which was hardly worth the trouble in the first place.

It was Foaly's idea to mechanize the whole procedure. He had the warlocks do their thing into lithium batteries, and then he set up a network of receiver dishes around the designated area. Sounds simple? Well, it wasn't. But there were definite advantages. For one thing there were no more power surges. Batteries didn't try to show off to each other. You could calculate exactly how many power cells were needed, and sieges could be extended for up to eight hours.

As it happened, the Fowl estate was the perfect location for a time-stop - isolated with a definite boundary. It even had elevated towers for the dishes, for heaven's sake. It was almost as if Artemis Fowl wanted time stopped ... Foaly's finger hesitated over the button. Could it be possible? After all, the human youth had been one step ahead throughout this whole affair.

'Commander?'

'Are we on-line yet?'

'Not exactly. There's something -'

Root's reaction nearly blew out the woofers in Foaly's earpiece.

'No, Foaly! There isn't something! None of your bright ideas, thank you very much. Captain Short's life is in danger, so push the button before I climb that tower and push it with your face!'

'Touchy,' muttered Foaly, and pushed the button.

Lieutenant Gudgeon checked his moonometer.

'You have eight hours.'

'I know how much time I have,' growled Root. 'And stop following me. Don't you have work to do?'

'Actually, now that you mention it, I have a bio-bomb to arm.'

Root rounded on him. 'Don't annoy me, Lieutenant. Having you pass comments at every turn is not improving my concentration. Just do whatever it is you feel you have to do. But be prepared to back it up at tribunal. If this one goes wrong, heads are going to roll.'

'Indeed,' muttered Gudgeon under his breath. 'But mine is not going to be one of them.'

Root checked the sky. A shimmering azure field had descended over the Fowl estate. Good. They were in limbo. Outside the walls, life continued at an exaggerated pace, but if anyone were to somehow gain access to the manor in spite of the fortified walls and high gate, they would find it deserted, all occupants trapped in the past.

So for the next eight hours, it would be twilight on the Fowl estate. After that, Root could not guarantee Holly's safety. Given the gravity of the situation, it was more than likely that Gudgeon would get the go-ahead to bio-bomb the whole place. Root had seen a blue rinse before. No living thing escaped, not even the rats.

Root caught up with Foaly at the base of the north tower. The centaur had parked a shuttle by the metre-thick wall. Already the work area was a mess of tangled wires and pulsating fibre optics.

'Foaly? Are you in here?'

The centaur's foil-capped head emerged from the belly of a disembowelled hard drive.

'Over here, Commander. You've come to push a button with my face, I presume.'

Root almost laughed. 'Don't tell me you're looking for an apology, Foaly. I've already used my quota for today. And that was to a lifelong friend.'

'Gudgeon? Forgive me, Commander, but I wouldn't waste my apologies on the lieutenant. He won't be wasting any on you when he stabs you in the back.'

'You're wrong about him. Gudgeon is a good officer. A bit eager, certainly, but he'll do the right thing when the time comes.'

'The right thing for himself maybe. I don't think Holly is at the top of his priority list.'

Root didn't answer. He couldn't.

'And another thing. I have a sneaking suspicion that young Artemis Fowl wanted us to stop time. After all, everything else we've tried has played straight into his hands.'

Root rubbed his temples. 'That's impossible. How could a human know about time-stoppage? Anyway, this is no time for theorizing, Foaly. I have less than eight hours to clean up this mess. So what have you got for me?'

Foaly clopped over to an equipment rack clamped to the wall.

'No heavy armament, that's for sure. Not after what happened to Retrieval One. No helmet either. That beast of a Mud Man seems to collect them. No, to show good faith, we're going to send you in unarmed and unarmoured.'

Root snorted. 'What manual did you get this from?'

'It's standard operating procedure. Fostering trust speeds communication.'

'Oh, stop quoting and give me something to shoot.'

'Suit yourself,' sighed Foaly, selecting what looked like a finger from the rack.

'What's that?'

'It's a finger. What does it look like?'

'A finger,' admitted Root.

'Yes, but not any ordinary finger.' He glanced around to make sure that no one else was watching. 'The tip contains a pressurized dart. One shot only. You tap the knuckle with your thumb and someone goes sleepy-bye.'

'Why haven't I seen this before?'

'It's a covert kinda thing ...'

'And?' said Root suspiciously.

'Well, there have been accidents ...'

'Tell me, Foaly.'

'Our agents keep forgetting they have it on.'

'Meaning they shoot themselves.'

Foaly nodded miserably. 'One of our best sprites was picking his nose at the time. Three days on the critical list.'

Root rolled the memory latex on to his index finger, where it immediately assumed the shape and flesh tone of the host digit.

'Don't worry, Foaly, I'm not a complete idiot. Anything else?'

Foaly unhooked what appeared to be a false bottom from the equipment rack.

'You're not serious! What does that do?'

'Nothing,' admitted the centaur. 'But it gets a great laugh at parties.'

Root chuckled. Twice. That was a major lapse for him.

'OK, levity over. Are you going to wire me?'

'Naturally. One iris-cam. What colour?' He peered into the commander's eyes. 'Hmm. Mud brown.' He selected a small vial from the shelf and removed the electronic contact lens from a fluid capsule. Plucking Root's eyelid with thumb and forefinger, he slotted in the iris-cam. 'That might irritate you. Try not to rub or it could end up in the back of your eye. Then we'd be looking into your head, and there's nothing interesting in there, heaven knows.'

Root blinked, resisting the urge to knead his watering eye.

'That's it?'

Foaly nodded. 'That's all we dare risk.'

The commander agreed reluctantly. His hip felt very light without a tri-barrelled blaster dangling from it.

'OK. I suppose this amazing dart finger will have to do. Honestly, Foaly, if this blows up in my face, you'll be on the next shuttle back to Haven.'

The centaur snickered. 'Just be careful in the toilet.'

Root didn't laugh. There were some things you didn't joke about.

Artemis's watch had stopped. It was as though Greenwich wasn't there any more. Or perhaps, mused Artemis, we're the ones who have disappeared. He checked CNN. It had frozen. A picture of Riz Khan jittered slightly on the screen. Artemis could not hold back a satisfied smile. They had done it, just like the Book said. The LEP had stopped time. All according to plan.

Time to check out a theory. Artemis wheeled over to the monitor bank and punched up the Mam Cam on the seventy-centimetre main monitor. Angeline Fowl was no longer on the chaise longue. Artemis panned around the room. It was empty. His mother had gone. Disappeared. His smile widened. Perfect. Just as he'd suspected.

Artemis switched his attention to Holly Short. She was banging the bed again. Occasionally she would rise from the mattress, pounding the wall with her bare fists. Maybe it was more than frustration. Could there be method in her madness? He tapped the monitor with a slim finger.

'What are you up to, Captain? What's your little plan?' He was distracted by a movement on the avenue monitor.

'At last,' he breathed. 'The games begin.' A figure was advancing down the avenue. Small, but imposing nonetheless. Unshielded too. Finished playacting then.

Artemis punched the intercom button.

'Butler? We have a guest. I'll show him in. You get back here and police the surveillance cameras.'

Butler's voice came back tinny through the speaker.

'Ten four, Artemis. On my way.'

Artemis buttoned his designer jacket, pausing at the mirror to straighten his tie. The trick to negotiation was to hold all the cards going in and, even if you didn't, to try to look as though you did.

Artemis put on his best sinister face. Evil, he told himself, evil but highly intelligent. And determined, don't forget determined. He put a hand on the doorknob. Steady now. Deep breaths, and try not to think about the possibility that you have misjudged this situation and are about to be shot dead. One, two, three ... He opened the door.

'Good evening,' he said, every inch the gracious host, albeit a sinister, evil, intelligent and determined one.

Root stood on the doorstep, palms up, the universal gesture for Look, I'm not carrying a big murderous weapon.

'You're Fowl?'

'Artemis Fowl, at your service. And you are?'

'LEP Commander Root. Right, we know each other's names, so could we get on with this?'

'Certainly.'

Root decided to chance his arm. 'Step outside then. Where I can see you.'

Artemis's face hardened. 'Have you learned nothing from my demonstrations? The ship? Your commandos? Do I need to kill someone?'

'No,' said Root hurriedly. 'I only -'

'You only meant to lure me outside, where I could be snatched and used to trade. Please, Commander Root, raise your game or send someone intelligent.'

Root felt the blood pump through his cheeks.

'Now you just listen to me, you young ...'

Artemis smiled, in command again. 'Not very good negotiation techniques, Commander, to lose your cool before we even get to the table.'

Root took several deep breaths.

'Fine. Whatever you say. Where would you prefer to conduct our talks?'

'Inside of course. You have my permission to enter, but remember, Captain Short's life is in your hands. Be careful with it.'

Root followed his host down the vaulted hallway. Generations of Fowls glared down at him from classical portraits. They passed through a stained-oak doorway to a long conference room. There were two places set at a round table, complete with pads, ashtrays and water jugs.

Root was delighted to see the ashtrays and immediately pulled a half-chewed cigar from his vest.

'Maybe you're not such a barbarian after all,' he grunted, exhaling a huge cloud of green smoke. The commander ignored the water jugs, instead pouring himself a shot of something purple from a hip flask. He drank deeply, belched and sat.

'Ready?' Artemis shuffled his notes, like a newsreader. 'Here is the situation as I see it. I have the means to expose your subterranean existence, and you are powerless to stop me. So, basically, whatever I ask for is a small price to pay.'

Root spat out a shred of fungus tobacco. 'You think you can just put all this information out over the Internet.'

'Well, not immediately, not with the time-stop in effect.'

Root choked on a lungful of smoke. Their ace in the hole. Rumbled.

'Well, if you know about the time-stop, you must also know that you are completely cut off from the outside world. You are, in effect, powerless.'

Artemis jotted a note on the pad. 'Let's save some time here. I grow weary of your clumsy bluffs. In the case of an abduction, the LEP will first send a crack Retrieval team to get back what has been lost. You have done so. Excuse me while I titter. Crack team? Honestly. A Cub-Scout patrol armed with water pistols could have defeated them.'

Root fumed silently, taking out his anger on the cigar butt.

'The next official step is negotiation. And finally, when the eight-hours' time limit is about to run out, and if no solution can be reached, a bio-bomb is detonated, contained by the time-field.'

'You appear to know an awful lot about us, Master Fowl. I don't suppose you'll tell me how?'

'Correct.'

Root mashed the remains of his cigar into the crystal ashtray.

'So let's have it, what are your demands?'

'One demand. Singular.'

Artemis slid his notepad across the polished table. Root read what was written there.

'One tonne of twenty-four-carat gold. Small unmarked ingots only. You can't be serious.'

'Oh, but I am.'

Root sat forward in his chair. 'Don't you see? Your position is untenable. Either you give us back Captain Short or we will be forced to kill you all. There is no middle ground. We don't negotiate. Not really. I'm just here to explain the facts to you.'

Artemis smiled his vampire smile. 'Oh, but you will negotiate with me, Commander.'

'Oh, really? And what makes you so special?'

'I am special, because I know how to escape the time-field.'

'Impossible,' snorted Root. 'Can't be done.'

'Oh yes it can. Trust me, I haven't been wrong yet.'

Root tore off the top page, folding it into his pocket.

'I'll have to think about this.'

'Take your time. We have eight hours ... excuse me, seven and a half hours, then time's up for everybody.'

Root said nothing for a long while, tapping his nails on the tabletop. He took a breath to speak, then changed his mind and stood abruptly.

'We'll be in touch. Don't worry, I'll see myself out.'

Artemis pushed his chair back.

'You do that. But remember this, none of your race has permission to enter here while I'm alive.'

Root stalked down the hallway, glaring back at the oil paintings. Better to leave now and process this new information. The Fowl boy was indeed a slippery opponent. But he was making one basic mistake - the assumption that Root would play by the rules. However, Julius Root hadn't got his Commander's bars by following any rule book. Time for a bit of unorthodox action.

The videotape from Root's iris-cam was being reviewed by experts.

'You see there,' said Professor Cumulus, a behavioural specialist. 'That twitch, he's lying.'

'Nonsense,' huffed Doctor Argon, a psychologist from below the United States. 'He's itchy, that's all. He's itchy so he scratches. Nothing sinister in it.'

Cumulus turned to Foaly.

'Listen to him. How can I be expected to work with this charlatan?'

'Witch doctor,' countered Argon.

Foaly raised his hairy palms.

'Gentlemen, please. We need agreement here. A concrete profile.'

'It's no use,' said Argon. 'I can't work in these conditions.'

Cumulus folded his arms. 'If he can't work, neither can I.'

Root strode through the shuttle double doors. His trademark purple complexion was even rosier than usual.

'That human is toying with us. I will not have it. Now, what did our experts make of the tape?'

Foaly moved slightly to the side, allowing the commander a clear run at the so-called experts.

'Apparently they can't work in these conditions.'

Root's eyes narrowed to slits, bringing his prey into sharp focus. 'Excuse me?'

'The good doctor is a halfwit,' said Cumulus, unfamiliar with the commander's temper.

'I-I'm a halfwit?' stuttered Argon, equally ignorant. 'What about you, you cave fairy? Plastering your absurd interpretations on to the most innocent of gestures.'

'Innocent? The boy is a bag of nerves. Obviously lying. It's textbook.'

Root slammed a clenched fist on to the table, sending a spider's web of cracks scurrying across the surface.

'Silence!'

And silence there was. Instantly.

'Now, you two experts are on handsome retainers for your profiling work. Correct?'

The pair nodded, afraid to speak in case that broke the silence rule.

'This is probably the case of your lives, so I want you to concentrate very hard. Understood?'

More nods.

Root popped the camera out of his weeping eye.

'Fast-forward it, Foaly. Towards the end.'

The tape hopped forward erratically. On screen, Root followed the human into his conference room.

'There. Stop it there. Can you zoom in on his face?'

'Can I zoom in on his face?' snorted Foaly. 'Can a dwarf steal the web from under a spider?'

'Yes,' replied Root.

'That was a rhetorical question actually.'

'I don't need a grammar lesson, Foaly, just zoom in, would you?'

Foaly ground his tombstone teeth.

'OK, boss. Will do.'

The centaur's fingers prodded the keyboard with lightning speed. Artemis's visage grew to fill the plasma screen.

'I'd advise you to listen,' said Root, squeezing the experts' shoulders. 'This is a pivotal moment in your careers.'

'I am special,' said the mouth on the screen, 'because I can escape the time-field.'

'Now tell me,' said Root. 'Is he lying?'

'Run it again,' said Cumulus. 'Show me the eyes.'

Argon nodded. 'Yes. Just the eyes.'

Foaly tapped a few more keys, and Artemis's deep blue eyes expanded to the width of the screen.

'I am special,' boomed the human voice, 'because I can escape the time-field.'

'Well, is he lying?'

Cumulus and Argon looked at each other, all traces of antagonism gone.

'No,' they said simultaneously.

'He's telling the truth,' added the behaviourist.

'Or,' clarified the psychologist, 'at least he thinks he is.'

Root swabbed his eye with a cleansing solution.

'That's what I thought. When I looked that human in the face, I figured he was either a genius or crazy.'

Artemis's cool eyes glared at them from the screen.

'So which is it?' asked Foaly. 'A genius or crazy?'

Root grabbed his tri-barrelled blaster from the gun rack.

'What's the difference?' he snapped, strapping his trusty weapon to his hip. 'Get me an outside line to E1. This Fowl person seems to know all of our rules, so it's time to break a few.'

CHAPTER 7: MULCH

TIME to introduce a new character to our otherworldly pageant. Well, not strictly speaking a new character. We have encountered him before, in the LEP booking line. On remand for numerous larcenies: Mulch Diggums, the kleptomaniac dwarf. A dubious individual, even by Artemis Fowl's standards. As if this account didn't already suffer from an overdose of amoral individuals.

Born to a typical dwarf cavern-dwelling family, Mulch had decided early that mining was not for him and resolved to put his talents to another use, namely digging and entering, generally entering Mud People's property. Of course this meant forfeiting his magic. Dwellings were sacred. If you broke that rule, you had to be prepared to accept the consequences. Mulch didn't mind. He didn't care much for magic anyway. There had never been much use for it down the mines.

Things had gone pretty well for a few centuries, and he'd built up quite a lucrative above-ground memorabilia business. That was until he'd tried to sell the Jules Rimet Cup to an undercover LEP operative. From then on his luck had turned, and he'd been arrested over twenty times to date. A total of 300 years in and out of prison.

Mulch had a prodigious appetite for tunnelling, and that, unfortunately, is a literal translation. For those unfamiliar with the mechanics of dwarf tunnelling, I shall endeavour to explain them as tastefully as possible. Like some members of the reptile family, dwarf males can unhinge their jaws, allowing them to ingest several kilos of earth a second. This material is processed by a super-efficient metabolism, stripped of any useful minerals and ... ejected at the other end, as it were. Charming.

At present, Mulch was languishing in a stone-walled cell in LEP Central. At least, he was trying to project an image of a languishing, unperturbed kind of dwarf. Actually, he was quaking in his steel-toe-capped boots.

The goblin/dwarf turf war was flaring up at the moment and some bright spark LEP elf had seen fit to put him in a cell with a gang of psyched-up goblins. An oversight perhaps. More likely a spot of revenge for trying to pick his arresting officer's pocket in the booking line.

'So, dwarf,' sneered the head-honcho goblin, a wart-faced fellow covered in tattoos. 'How come you don't chew your way outta here?'

Mulch rapped on the walls. 'Solid rock.'

The goblin laughed. 'So what? Can't be any harder than your dwarf skull.'

His cronies laughed. So did Mulch. He thought it might be wise. Wrong.

'You laughin' at me, dwarf?'

Mulch stopped laughing.

'With you,' he corrected. 'I'm laughing with you. That skull joke was pretty funny.'

The goblin advanced until his slimy nose was a centimetre from Mulch's own. 'You pay-tron-izin' me, dwarf?'

Mulch swallowed, calculating. If he unhinged now, he could probably swallow the leader before the others reacted. Still, goblins were murder on the digestion. Very bony.

The goblin conjured up a fireball around his fist. 'I asked you a question, stumpy.'

Mulch could feel every sweat gland on his body pop into instant overdrive. Dwarfs did not like fire. They didn't even like thinking about flames. Unlike the rest of the fairy races, dwarfs had no desire to live above ground. Too close to the sun. Ironic for someone in the Mud People Possession Liberation business.

'N-no need for that,' he stammered. 'I was just trying to be friendly.'

'Friendly,' scoffed wart-face. 'Your kind don't know the meanin' of the word. Cowardly backstabbers, the lot of you.'

Mulch nodded diplomatically. 'We have been known to be a bit treacherous.'

'A bit treacherous! A bit treacherous! My brother Phlegm was ambushed by a crowd of dwarfs disguised as dung heaps! He's still in traction!'

Mulch nodded sympathetically. 'The old dung heap ruse. Disgraceful. One of the reasons I don't associate with the Brotherhood.'

Wart-face twirled the fireball between his fingers. 'There are two things under this world that I really despise.'

Mulch had a feeling that he was about to find out what they were.

'One is a stinkin' dwarf.'

No surprises there.

'And the other is a traitor to his own kind. And from what I hear, you fall neatly into both categories.'

Mulch smiled weakly. 'Just my luck.'

'Luck ain't got nothin' to do with it. Fortune delivered you into my hands.'

On another day, Mulch might have pointed out that luck and fortune were basically the same thing. Not today.

'You like fire, dwarf?'

Mulch shook his head.

Wart-face grinned.

'Now ain't that a shame, 'cause any second now I'm going to ram this here fireball down your throat.'

The dwarf swallowed drily. Wasn't it just typical of the Dwarf Brotherhood? What do dwarfs hate? Fire. Who are the only creatures with the ability to conjure fireballs? Goblins. So who did the dwarfs pick a fight with? What a real no-brainer.

Mulch backed up to the wall.

'Careful there. We could all go up.'

'Not us,' grinned wart-face, snorting the fireball up two elongated nostrils. 'Completely fireproof.'

Mulch was perfectly aware what would happen next. He'd seen it too many times in the back alleys. A group of goblins would corner a stray brother dwarf, pin him down, and then the leader would give him the double barrels straight in the face.

Wart-face's nostrils quivered as he prepared to vent the inhaled fireball. Mulch quailed. There was only one chance. The goblins had made a basic mistake. They'd forgotten to pin his arms.

The goblin drew a breath through his mouth, then closed it. More exhalation pressure for the fire stream. He tilted his head back, pointing his nose at the dwarf, and let fly. Quick as a flash, Mulch jammed his thumbs up wart-face's nostrils. Disgusting, yes, but definitely better than being dwarf kebab.

The fireball had nowhere to go. It rebounded on the balls of Mulch's thumbs and ricocheted back into the goblin's head. The tear ducts provided the path of least resistance, so the flames compressed into pressurized streams, erupting just below the goblin's eyes. A sea of flame spread across the cell roof.

Mulch withdrew his thumbs and, after a quick wipe, thrust them in his mouth, allowing the natural balm in his saliva to begin the healing process. Of course if he'd still had his magic, he could have just wished the scorched digits better. But that was the price you paid for a life of crime.

Wart-face didn't look so good. Smoke was leaking from every orifice in his head. Flameproof goblins may be, but the errant fireball had given his tubes a good scouring. He swayed like a strand of seaweed, then collapsed face down on the concrete floor. Something crunched. Probably a big goblin nose.

The other gang members did not react favourably.

'Look what he did to the boss!'

'That stinkin' stump.'

'Let's fry 'im.'

Mulch backed up even further. He'd been hoping the remaining goblins would lose their nerve once their leader was out of commission. Apparently not. Even though it was most definitely not in his nature, Mulch had no option but to attack.

He unhinged his jaw and leaped forward, clamping his teeth around the foremost goblin's head.

'Ow, bagg off!' he shouted around the obstruction in his mouth. 'Bagg off or ur briend gedds it!'

The others froze, uncertain of their next move. Of course they'd all seen what dwarf molars could do to a goblin head. Not a pretty sight.

Each one popped a fireball in his fist.

'I'm warnih ooh!'

'You can't get us all, stumpy.'

Mulch resisted the impulse to bite down. It is the strongest of dwarf urges, a genetic memory born from millennia spent tunnelling. The fact that the goblin was wriggling slimily didn't help. His options were running out. The gang was advancing and he was powerless as long as his mouth was full. It was crunch time. Pardon the pun.

Suddenly the cell door clanked open and what seemed like an entire squadron of LEP officers flooded the confined space. Mulch felt the cold steel of a gun barrel against his temple.

'Spit out the prisoner,' ordered a voice.

Mulch was delighted to comply. A thoroughly slimed goblin collapsed retching on the floor.

'You goblins, put 'em out.'

One by one the fireballs were extinguished.

'That's not my fault,' whined Mulch, pointing to the spasming wart-face. 'He blew himself up.'

The officer holstered his weapon, drawing out a set of cuffs.

'I couldn't care less what you do to each other,' he said, spinning Mulch and snapping the cuffs on. 'If it was up to me, I'd put the whole lot of you in a big room, and come back a week later to sluice it out. But Commander Root wants to see you above ground ASAP.'

'ASAP?'

'Now, if not sooner.'

Mulch knew Root. The commander was responsible for several of his government hotel visits. If Julius wanted to see him, it probably wasn't for drinks and a movie.

'Now? But it's daylight now. I'll burn.'

The LEP officer laughed.

'It ain't daylight where you're going, pal. Where you're going it ain't anything.'

Root was waiting for the dwarf inside the time-field portal. The portal was yet another of Foaly's inventions. Fairies could be introduced to and leave the time-field without affecting the altered flow inside the field. This effectively meant that even though it took nearly six hours to get Mulch to the surface, he was injected into the field only moments after Root had the notion to send for him.

It was Mulch's first time in a field. He stood watching life proceed at an exaggerated rate outside the shimmering corona. Cars zipped by at impossible speeds, and clouds tumbled across the skyline as though driven by force-ten gales.

'Mulch, you little reprobate,' roared Root. 'You can take off that suit now. The field is UV-filtered, or so I'm told.'

The dwarf had been issued a blackout suit at E1. Even though dwarfs had thick skins, they were extremely sensitive to sunlight and had a burn time of less than three minutes. Mulch peeled off the skintight suit.

'Nice to see you, Julius.'

'That's Commander Root to you.'

'Commander now. I heard that. Clerical error, was it?'

Root's teeth ground his cigar to a pulp.

'I don't have time for this impudence, convict. And the only reason that my boot is not up your behind right now is that I have a job for you.'

Mulch frowned. 'Convict? I have a name, you know, Julius.'

Root squatted to the dwarf's level. 'I don't know what dreamworld you live in, convict, but in the real world you are a criminal and it is my job to ensure your life is as unpleasant as possible. So if you're expecting civility just because I've testified against you some fifteen times, forget it!'

Mulch rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had left red welts.

'Fine, Commander. No need to blow a gasket. I'm not a murderer, you know, just a petty criminal.'

'From what I hear, you nearly made the transformation below in the cells.'

'Not my fault. They attacked me.'

Root screwed a fresh cigar into his mouth.

'Fine, whatever. Just follow me, and don't steal anything.'

'Yessir, Commander,' said Mulch innocently. He didn't need to steal anything else. He'd already palmed Root's field-access card when the commander had made the mistake of leaning over.

They crossed the Retrieval perimeter to the avenue.

'Do you see that manor?'

'What manor?'

Root rounded on him. 'I don't have time for this, convict. Nearly half my time-stop has elapsed. Another few hours and one of my best officers will be blue-rinsed!'

Mulch shrugged. 'None of my concern. I'm just a criminal, remember. And by the way, I know what you want me to do, and the answer is no.'

'I haven't even asked you yet.'

'It's obvious. I'm a housebreaker. That's a house. You can't go in because you'll lose your magic, but my magic is already gone. Two and two.'

Root spat out the cigar. 'Don't you have any civic pride? Our entire way of life is on the line here.'

'Not my way of life. Fairy prison, human prison. It's all the same to me.'

The commander thought about it.

'OK, you slime. Fifty years off your sentence.'

'I want amnesty.'

'In your dreams, Mulch.'

'Take it or leave it.'

'Seventy-five years in minimum security. You take it or leave it.'

Mulch pretended to think. It was all academic, seeing as he intended escaping anyway.

'Single cell?'

'Yes, yes. Single cell. Now, will you do it?'

'Very well, Julius. Only because it's you.'

Foaly was searching for a matching iris-cam.

'Hazel, I think. Or perhaps tawny. You really do have stunning eyes, Mister Mulch.'

'Thank you, Foaly. My mother always said they were my most attractive feature.'

Root was pacing the shuttle floor.

'You two do realize we're on a deadline here, don't you? Never mind matching the colour. Just give him a camera.'

Foaly plucked a lens from its solution with tweezers.

'This is not just vanity, Commander. The closer the match, the less interference from the actual eye.'

'Whatever, whatever, just get on with it.'

Foaly grabbed Mulch's chin, holding him still.

'There you are. We're with you all the way.'

Foaly twisted a tiny cylinder into the thick tufts of hair growing from Mulch's ear.

'Wired for sound now too. In case you need to call for assistance.'

The dwarf smiled wryly. 'Forgive me for not swelling with confidence. I find I've always done better on my own.'

'If you can call seventeen convictions doing better,' chuckled Root.

'Oh, we have time for jokes now, do we?'

Root grabbed him by the shoulder. 'You're right. We don't. Let's go.'

He dragged Mulch across a grassy verge to a cluster of cherry trees.

'I want you to tunnel in there and find out how this Fowl person knows so much about us. Probably some surveillance device. Whatever it is, destroy it. Find Captain Short if possible and see what you can do for her. If she is dead, at least it will clear the way for a bio-bomb.'

Mulch squinted across the landscape. 'I don't like it.'

'What don't you like?'

'The lie of the land. I smell limestone. Solid-rock foundation. There might not be a way in.'

Foaly trotted across. 'I've done a scan. The original structure is based totally on rock, but some of the later extensions stray on to clay. The wine cellar in the south wing appears to have a wooden floor. It should be no problem for someone with a mouth like yours.'

Mulch decided to take that as a statement of fact rather than an insult. He opened the bum-flap on his tunnelling trousers. 'Right. Stand back.'

Root and the surrounding LEP officers rushed for cover, but Foaly, who had never actually seen a dwarf tunnelling, decided to stay for a peek.

'Good luck, Mulch.'

The dwarf unhinged his jaw.

'Ank oo,' he mumbled, bending over for launch.

The centaur looked around.

'Where's everyone -'

He never finished that statement, because a blob of recently swallowed and even more recently recycled clay whacked him in the face. By the time he'd cleared his eyes, Mulch had disappeared down a vibrating hole, and there was the sound of hearty laughter shaking the cherry trees.

Mulch followed a loamy vein through a volcanic fold in the rock. Nice consistency, not too many loose stones. Plenty of insect life too. Vital for strong healthy teeth, a dwarf's most important attribute - the first thing a prospective mate looked at. Mulch went low to the limestone, his belly almost scraping the rock. The deeper the tunnel, the less chance of subsidence on the surface. You couldn't be too careful these days, not with motion sensors and landmines. Mud People went to extraordinary lengths to protect their valuables. With good reason, as it happened.

Mulch felt a vibration cluster to his left. Rabbits. The dwarf fixed the location in his internal compass. Always useful to know where the local wildlife hung out. He skirted the warren, following the manor foundations around in a long north-westerly loop.

Wine cellars were easy to locate. Over the centuries, residue seeped through the floor, infusing the land beneath with the wine's personality. This one was sombre, nothing cheeky here. A touch of fruit, but not enough to lighten the flavour. Definitely an occasion wine on the bottom rack. Mulch burped. That was good clay.

The dwarf aimed his scything jaws skywards, punching through the floorboards. He hauled himself through the jagged hole, shaking the last of the recycled mud from his trousers.

He was in a blessedly dark room, perfect for dwarf vision. His sonar had guided him to an uncovered spot in the floor. One metre to the left and he would have emerged in a huge barrel of Italian red.

Mulch rehinged his jaw and padded across to the wall. He flattened a conch-like ear to the red brickwork. For a moment he was absolutely still, absorbing the house's vibrations. A lot of low-frequency humming. There was a generator somewhere, and plenty of juice running through the wires.

Footsteps too. Way up. Maybe on the third floor. And close by. A crashing sound. Metal on concrete. There it was again. Someone was building something. Or breaking something down.

Something skittered past his foot. Mulch squashed it instinctively. It was a spider. Just a spider.

'Sorry, little friend,' he said to the grey smear. 'I'm a bit on the jittery side.'

The steps were wooden, of course. More than a century old too by the smell of them. Steps like that creaked as soon as you looked at them. Better than any pressure pads for giving away intruders. Mulch climbed along the edges, one foot in front of the other. Right in by the wall was where the wood had most support and was less likely to creak.

This was not as simple as it sounds. Dwarf feet are designed for spadework, not for the delicate intricacies of ballet dancing or balancing on wooden steps. Nonetheless, Mulch reached the door without incident. A couple of minor squeaks, but nothing that would be detectable by human ears or hardware.

The door was locked, naturally, but it may as well not have been for all the challenge it presented to a kleptomaniac dwarf.

Mulch reached into his beard, plucking out a sturdy hair. Dwarf hair is radically different from the human variety. Mulch's beard and head hair were actually a matrix of antennae that helped him to navigate and avoid danger below ground. Once removed from its pore, the hair immediately stiffened in rapid rigor mortis. Mulch twisted the end in the seconds before it became completely rigid. A perfect pick.

One quick jiggle and the lock yielded. Only two tumblers. Terrible security. Typical of humans, they never expected an attack from below. Mulch stepped on to a parquet corridor. The whole place smelled of money. He could make a fortune here, if only he had the time.

There were cameras just below the architrave. Tastefully done, nestling in the natural shadows. But vigilant none the less. Mulch stood for a moment, calculating the system's blindspot. Three cameras on the corridor. Ninety-second sweep. No way through.

'You could ask for help?' said a voice in his ear.

'Foaly?' Mulch pointed his wired eyeball at the nearest camera. 'Can you do anything about those?' he whispered.

The dwarf heard the sound of a keyboard being manipulated, and suddenly his right eye zoomed like a camera lens.

'Handy,' breathed Mulch. 'I've got to get me one of these.'

Root's voice crackled through the tiny speaker. 'No chance, convict. Government issue. Anyway, what would you do with one in prison? Get a close-up of the other side of your cell?'

'You're such a charmer, Julius. What's the matter? Are you jealous because I'm succeeding where you failed?'

Root's foul swearing was drowned out by Foaly.

'OK, I've got it. Simple video network. Not even digital. I'm going to broadcast a loop of the last ten seconds to every camera through our dishes. That should give you a few minutes.'

Mulch shuffled uncomfortably. 'How long will that take? I'm a bit exposed here, you know.'

'It's already started,' replied Foaly. 'So get moving.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. Elementary electronics. I've been messing with human surveillance since kindergarten. You'll just have to trust me.'

I'd rather trust a bunch of humans not to hunt a species to extinction than trust an LEP consultant, thought Mulch. But aloud he said, 'OK. I'm away. Over and out.'

He sneaked down the hall. Even his hands were sneaky, padding the air as if he could somehow make himself lighter. Whatever that centaur did must have worked, because there were no agitated Mud People racing down the stairs, waving primitive gunpowder weapons.

Stairs. Ah, stairs. Mulch had a thing for stairs. They were like predug shafts. He found that inevitably the best booty lay at their summit. And what a stairway. Stained oak, with the intricate carvings generally associated with either the eighteenth century or the obscenely rich. Mulch rubbed his finger along an ornate banister. In this case, probably both.

Still, no time to moon about. Stairways did not tend to remain deserted for long, especially during a siege. Who could tell how many bloodthirsty troopers waited behind each door, eager for a fairy head to add to their stuffed trophy wall.

Mulch climbed carefully, taking nothing for granted. Even solid oak creaked. He stuck to the borders, avoiding the carpet inlay. The dwarf knew from conviction number eight how easy it was to conceal a pressure pad beneath the deep shag of some antique weave.

He reached the landing with his head still attached to his shoulders. But there was another problem quite literally brewing. Dwarf digestion, due to its accelerated rate, can be quite explosive. The loosely packed soil on the Fowl estate was very well aerated and a lot of that air had entered Mulch's tubes along with the soil and minerals. Now the air wanted to get out.

Dwarf etiquette dictated that gas be passed while still in the tunnel, but Mulch didn't have time for manners. Now he regretted not taking a moment to get rid of the gas while he was in the cellar. The problem with dwarf gas was that it couldn't go up, only down. Imagine, if you will, the catastrophic effects of burping while digesting a mouthful of clay. Total system back-up. Not a pretty sight. Thus dwarf anatomy ensured that all gas was passed below, actually aiding in the expulsion of unwanted clay. Of course, there's a simpler way of putting this, but that version can only be read in the adult book.

Mulch wrapped his arms around his stomach. He'd better get out of the open. A blowout on a landing like this could take out the windows. He shuffled along the corridor, skipping through the first doorway he encountered.

More cameras. Quite a lot of them, in fact. Mulch studied the lenses' sweep. Four were surveying the general floorspace, but another three were fixed.

'Foaly? You there?' whispered the dwarf.

'No!' The typical sarcastic reply. 'I have much better things to do than worry about the collapse of civilization as we know it.'

'Yes, thank you. Don't let my life being in danger interrupt your merriment.'

'I'll try not to.'

'I have a challenge for you.'

Foaly was instantly interested. 'Really? Go on.'

Mulch pointed his gaze at the recessed cameras, half hidden in the swirling architrave. 'I need to know where those three cameras are pointing. Exactly.'

Foaly laughed. 'That's not a challenge. Those old video systems emit faint ion beams. Invisible to the naked eye, of course, but not with your iris-cam.'

The hardware in Mulch's eye flickered and sparked.

'Oww!'

'Sorry. Small charge.'

'You could have warned me.'

'I'll give you a big kiss later, you baby. I thought dwarfs were tough.'

'We are tough. I'll show you just how tough when I get back.'

Root's voice interrupted the posturing. 'You won't be showing anyone anything, convict, except perhaps where the toilet is in your cell. Now, what do you see?'

Mulch looked at the room again through his ion-sensitive eye. Each camera was emitting a faint beam, like the last evening sunrays. The rays pooled on a portrait of Artemis Fowl Senior.

'Not behind the picture. Oh, please.'

Mulch placed his ear against the picture glass. Nothing electrical. Not alarmed then. Just to be sure, he sniffed the frame's edge. No plastic or copper. Wood, steel and glass. Some lead in the paint. He curled a nail behind the frame and pulled. The picture came away smoothly, hinged on the side. And behind it. A safe.

'It's a safe,' said Foaly.

'I know that, you idiot. I'm trying to concentrate here! If you want to help, tell me the combination.'

'No problem. Oh, by the way, there's another little shock coming. Maybe the big baby would like to suck his thumb for comfort.'

'Foaly. I'm going to ... Owwww!'

'There. That's the X-ray on.'

Mulch squinted at the safe. It was incredible. He could see right into the works. Tumblers and catches stood out in shadowy relief. He blew on his hairy fingers and twisted the combination dial. In seconds the safe lay open before him.

'Oh,' he said, disappointed.

'What is it?'

'Nothing. Just human currency. Nothing of value.'

'Leave it,' ordered Root. 'Try another room. Get going.'

Mulch nodded. Another room. Before his time ran out. But something was niggling at him. If this guy was so clever, why did he put the safe behind a painting? Such a cliché. Totally against form. No. Something wasn't right here. They were being duped somehow.

Mulch closed the safe, swinging the portrait back into position. It swung smoothly, weightless on the hinges. Weightless. He swung the picture out again. And back in.

'Convict. What are you doing?'

'Shut up, Julius! I mean, quiet a moment, Commander.'

Mulch squinted at the frame's profile. A bit thicker than normal. Quite a bit thicker. Even taking the box frame into account. Five centimetres. He ran a nail down the heavy cartridge backing and stripped it away to reveal ...

'Another safe.'

A smaller one. Custom-made, obviously.

'Foaly. I can't see through this.'

'Lead-lined. You're on your own, burglar boy. Do what you do best.'

'Typical,' muttered Mulch, flattening his ear to the cold steel.

He twirled the dial experimentally. Nice action. The clicks were muted by the lead, he would have to concentrate. The upside was that something this thin could have only three tumblers at the most.

Mulch held his breath and twisted the dial, one cog at a time. To the normal ear, even with amplification, the clicks would have seemed uniform. But to Mulch, each cog had a distinctive signature and when a ratchet caught, it was so loud as to be deafening.

'One,' he breathed.

'Hurry it up, convict. Your time is running out.'

'You interrupted to tell me that? I can see now how you made commander, Julius.'

'Convict. I'm going to ... '

But it was no use. Mulch had removed his earpiece, slipping it into his pocket. Now he could devote his full attention to the task at hand.

'Two.'

There was noise outside. In the hall. Someone was coming. About the size of an elephant by the size of it. No doubt this was the man mountain that had made mincemeat of the Retrieval Squad.

Mulch blinked a bead of sweat from his eye. Concentrate. Concentrate. The cogs clicked by. Millimetre by millimetre. Nothing was catching. The floor seemed to be hopping gently, though he could be imagining it.

Click, click. Come on. Come on. His fingers were slick with perspiration, the dial slipping between them. Mulch wiped them on his jerkin. 'Now, baby, come on. Talk to me.' Click. Thunk. 'Yes!'

Mulch twisted the handle. Nothing. Still an obstruction. He ran a fingertip over the metal face. There. A small irregularity. A micro keyhole. Too small for your average lock pick. Time for a little trick he'd learned in prison. Quickly though, his stomach was bubbling like stew in the oven, and the footsteps were getting closer.

Selecting a sturdy chin hair, Mulch fed it gently into the tiny hole. When the tip reappeared, he pulled the root from his chin. The hair immediately stiffened, retaining the shape of the lock's interior.

Mulch held his breath and twisted. Smooth as a goblin's lie, the lock opened. Beautiful. At moments like these, it was almost worth all the jail time.

The kleptomaniac dwarf swung back the little door. Beautiful work. Almost worthy of a fairy forge. Light as a wafer. Inside was a small chamber. And in the chamber was ...

'Oh, gods above,' breathed Mulch.

Then things came to a head rather rapidly. The shock that Mulch had experienced communicated itself to his bowels, and they decided the excess air had got to go. Mulch knew the symptoms. Jelly legs, bubbling cramps, wobbly behind. In the seconds remaining to him, he snatched the object from the safe and, leaning over, he clasped his knees for support.

The constrained wind had built itself up to mini-cyclone intensity and could not be constrained. And so it exited. Rather abrasively. Blowing open Mulch's bum-flap and slamming into the rather large gentleman who had been sneaking up behind him.

Artemis was glued to the monitors. This was the time when things traditionally went wrong for kidnappers - the third quarter of operations. Having been successful thus far, the abductors tended to relax, light up a few cigarettes, get chatty with their hostages. Next thing they knew, they were flat on their faces with a dozen guns pointed at the backs of their heads. Not Artemis Fowl. He didn't make mistakes.

No doubt the fairies were reviewing the tapes of their first negotiating session, searching for anything that would give them a way in. Well, it was there all right. All they had to do was look. Buried just deep enough to make it look accidental.

It was possible that Commander Root would try another ruse. He was a wily one, no doubt about it. One who would not take kindly to being bested by a child. He would bear watching.

The mere thought of Root gave Artemis the shivers. He decided to check in again. He inspected the monitors.

Juliet was still in the kitchen, scrubbing at the sink. Washing the vegetables.

Captain Short was on her bunk. Quiet as the grave. No more bed banging. Perhaps he had been wrong about her. Perhaps there was no plan.

Butler stood at his post outside Holly's cell. Odd. He should have been on his rounds by now. Artemis grabbed a walkie-talkie.

'Butler?'

'Roger, base. Receiving.'

'Shouldn't you be on your rounds?'

There was a pause. 'I am, Artemis. Patrolling the main landing. Coming up on the safe room. I'm waving at you right now.'

Artemis glanced at the landing cameras. Deserted. From every angle. Definitely no waving manservant. He studied the monitors, counting under his breath .. .There! Every ten seconds, a slight jump. On every screen.

'A loop!' he cried, jumping from his chair. 'They're feeding us a loop!'

Over the speaker, he could hear Butler's pace quickening to a run.

'The safe room!'

Artemis's stomach dropped into queasy hell. Duped! He, Artemis Fowl, had been duped, even though he'd known it was coming. Inconceivable. It was arrogance that had done it. His own blinding arrogance, and now the entire plan could collapse around his ears.

He switched the walkie-talkie to Juliet's band. It was a pity now that he'd taken the house's intercom off-line, but it didn't operate on a secure frequency.

'Juliet?'

'Receiving.'

'Where are you right now?'

'In the kitchen. Wrecking my nails on this grater.'

'Leave it, Juliet. Check on the prisoner.'

'But, Artemis, the carrot sticks will dry out!'

'Leave it, Juliet!' shouted Artemis. 'Drop everything and check on the prisoner!'

Juliet obediently dropped everything, including the walkie-talkie. She'd sulk for days now. Never mind. There was no time to worry about a teenage girl's bruised ego. He had more important matters to tend to.

Artemis depressed the master switch on the computerized surveillance system. His only chance of purging the loop was a complete reboot. After several agonizing moments of screen snow, the monitors jumped and settled. Things were not as they had seemed only seconds before.

There was a grotesque thing in the safe room. It had apparently discovered the secret compartment. Not only that but it had managed to open the whisper lock. Amazing. Butler had it covered though. He was sneaking up behind the creature, and any moment now the intruder would find itself nose down in the carpet.

Artemis switched his attention to Holly. The elf was back to bed banging. Slamming the frame down over and over again, as though she could ...

It hit Artemis then, like a blast from a water cannon. If Holly had somehow smuggled an acorn in here, then one square centimetre of ground would be enough. If Juliet left that door open ...

'Juliet!' he shouted into the walkie-talkie. 'Juliet! Don't go in there!'

But it was useless. The girl's walkie-talkie lay buzzing on the kitchen floor, and Artemis could only watch helplessly as Butler's sister strode towards the cell door, muttering about carrots.

'The safe room!' exclaimed Butler, quickening his pace. His instinct was to go in all guns blazing, but training took over. Fairy hardware was most definitely superior to his own, and who knew how many barrels were aimed at the other side of that door right now. No, caution was most definitely the best part of valour in this particular situation.

He placed a palm against the wood, feeling for vibration. Nothing. No machinery then. Butler curled his fingers around the knob, twisting gently. With his other hand, he drew a Sig Sauer automatic from his shoulder holster. No time to fetch the dart rifle, it would have to be shoot to kill.

The door swung open noiselessly, as Butler knew it would, having oiled every hinge in the house himself. Before him was ... Well, to be honest, Butler wasn't quite sure what it was. If he didn't know better, that is at first glance, he could have sworn that the thing resembled nothing more than an enormous quivering ...

And then the thing exploded, jettisoning an amazing amount of tunnel waste directly at the unfortunate manservant! It was like being battered with a hundred sledgehammers simultaneously. Butler was lifted bodily and flung against the wall.

And as he lay there, consciousness slipping away from him, he prayed that Master Artemis hadn't managed to capture the moment on video.

Holly was weakening. The bedframe was nearly twice her body weight and the ridges were tearing cruel welts in her palms. But she couldn't stop now. Not when she was so close.

She slammed the post into the concrete again. A cloud of grey dust spiralled around her legs. Any second now, Fowl would tumble to her plan and she'd get the hypodermic treatment again. But until then ...

She gritted her teeth against the pain, heaving the bedframe to knee height. Then she saw it. A sliver of brown among the grey. Could it be true?

Pain forgotten, Captain Short dropped the bed, sinking quickly to her knees. There was indeed a small patch of earth poking through the cement. Holly fumbled the acorn from her boot, clasping it tightly in bloody fingers.

'I return you to the earth,' she whispered, worming her fist into the tiny space. 'And claim the gift that is my right.'

Nothing happened for a heartbeat. Perhaps two. Then Holly felt the magic rush up her arm like a jolt from an electrified troll fence. The shock sent her spinning across the room. For a moment the world swirled in a disconcerting kaleidoscope of colour, but when it settled Holly was no longer the defeated elf she had been.

'Right, Master Fowl.' She grinned, watching the blue sparks of fairy magic seal her wounds. 'Let's see what I have to do to get your permission to leave this place.'

'Drop everything,' sulked Juliet. 'Drop everything and check the prisoner.' She flicked blonde tresses expertly over a shoulder. 'He must think I'm his maid or something.'

She hammered on the cell door with the flat of her hand.

'I'm coming in now, fairy girl, so if you're doing anything embarrassing, please stop.'

Juliet punched the combination into the keypad. 'And no, I don't have your vegetables, or your washed fruit. But it's not my fault, Artemis in-sis-ted I come right down ...'

Juliet stopped talking, because there was nobody listening. She was preaching to an empty room. She waited for her brain to pass on an explanation. Nothing came. Eventually the notion to take another look filtered down.

She took a tentative step into the concrete cube. Nothing. Only a slight shimmering in the shadows. Like a mist. It was probably these stupid glasses. How were you supposed to see anything wearing mirrored sunglasses underground? And they were so nineties, they weren't even retro yet.

Juliet glanced guiltily at the monitor. Just a quick peek, what harm could it do? She whipped up the frames, sending her eyeballs spinning around the room.

In that instant a figure materialized before her. Just stepped out of the air. It was Holly. She was smiling.

'Oh, it's you. How did you -'

The fairy interrupted with a wave of her hand.

'Why don't you take off those glasses, Juliet? They really don't suit you.'

She's right, thought Juliet. And what a lovely voice. Like a choir all on its own. How could you argue with a voice like that?

'Sure. Caveman glasses off. Cool voice, by the way. Doh ray me and all that.'

Holly decided not to try deciphering Juliet's comments. It was hard enough when the girl was in full control of her brain.

'Now. A simple question.'

'No problem.' What a great idea.

'How many people in the house?'

Juliet thought. One and one and one.

And another one? No, Mrs Fowl wasn't there.

'Three,' she said finally. 'Me and Butler and, of course, Artemis. Mrs Fowl was here, but she went bye-bye, then she went bye-bye.'

Juliet giggled. She'd made a joke. A good one too.

Holly drew a breath to ask for clarification, then thought better of it. A mistake as it turned out.

'Has anyone else been here. Anyone like me?'

Juliet chewed her lip. 'There was one little man. In a uniform like yours. Not cute though. Not one bit. Just shouted and smoked a smelly cigar. Terrible complexion. Red as a tomato.'

Holly almost smiled. Root had come himself. No doubt the negotiations had been disastrous.

'No one else?'

'Not that I know of. If you see that man again, tell him to lay off the red meat. He's just a coronary waiting to happen.'

Holly swallowed a grin. Juliet was the only human she knew who was probably more lucid under the mesmer.

'OK. I'll tell him. Now, Juliet, I want you to stay in my room, and no matter what you hear, don't come out.'

Juliet frowned. 'This room? It's so boring. No TV or anything. Can't I go up to the lounge?'

'No. You have to stay here. Anyway, they've just installed a wall television. Cinema size. Wrestling, twenty-four hours a day.'

Juliet almost fainted with pleasure. She ran into the cell, gasping as her imagination supplied the pictures.

Holly shook her head. Well, she thought, at least one of us is happy.

Mulch gave his rear end a shake to dislodge any clumps of earth. If only his mother could see him now, spraying mud on the Mud People. That was irony, or something like it. Mulch had never been big on grammar in school. That or poetry. He'd never seen the point. Down the mines, there were only two phrases of any importance: 'Look, gold!' and 'Cave in, everybody out!' No hidden meanings there, or rhymes.

The dwarf buttoned his bum-flap, which had been blasted open by the gale emanating from his nether regions. Time to make a run for it. Whatever hope he'd had of escaping undiscovered had been blown. Literally.

Mulch retrieved his earpiece, screwing it firmly into his ear. Well, you never knew, even the LEP might prove useful.

'... And when I get my hands on you, convict, you'll wish you stayed down those mines ...'

Mulch sighed. Ah well. Nothing new there then.

Clasping the safe's treasure tightly in his fist, the dwarf turned to retrace his steps. To his utter amazement there was a human entangled in the banisters. Mulch was not one bit surprised that his recyclings had managed to hurl the elephantine Mud Man several metres through the air. Dwarf gas had been known to cause avalanches in the Alps. What did surprise him was the fact that the man had managed to get so close to him in the first place.

'You're good,' said Mulch, wagging a finger at the unconscious bodyguard. 'But nobody takes a body blow from Mulch Diggums and stays on their feet.'

The Mud Man stirred, the whites of his eyes showing beneath fluttering lids.

Root's voice crackled in the dwarf's ears. 'Get a move on, Mulch Diggums, before that Mud Man gets up and rearranges your innards. He took out an entire Retrieval team, you know.'

Mulch swallowed, his bravado suddenly deserting him.

'An entire Retrieval team? Maybe I should get back underground ... for the good of the mission.'

Skipping hurriedly around the groaning bodyguard, Mulch took the steps two at a time. No point in worrying about creaking stairs when you've just sent the intestinal equivalent of Hurricane Hal scurrying around the corridors.

He'd almost reached the cellar door when a figure shimmered into focus before him. Mulch recognized it as his arresting officer from the Renaissance Masters smuggling case.

'Captain Short.'

'Mulch. I wasn't expecting to see you.'

The dwarf shrugged. 'Julius had a dirty job. Someone had to do it.'

'I get it,' said Holly, nodding. 'You've already lost your magic. Smart. What did you find out?'

Mulch showed Holly his find. 'This was in his safe.'

'A copy of the Book!' gasped Holly. 'No wonder we're in this fix. We were playing into his hands all along.'

Mulch opened the cellar door. 'Shall we?'

'I can't. I'm under eyeball orders not to leave the house.'

'You magical types and your rituals. You have no idea how liberating it is to be rid of all that mumbo-jumbo.'

A series of sharp noises drifted down from the upper landing. It sounded like a troll thrashing around in a crystal emporium.

'We can debate ethics at a later date. Right now I suggest we make ourselves scarce.'

Mulch nodded. 'Agreed. This guy took out an entire Retrieval squad apparently.'

Holly paused, half shielded.

'An entire squad? Hmm. Fully equipped. I wonder ...'

She continued her fade-out, and the last thing to go was her widening grin.

Mulch was tempted to hang around. There weren't many things more fun to watch than a heavily armed Recon officer going to town on a bunch of unsuspecting humans. By the time Captain Short got through with this Fowl character, he'd be begging her to get out of his manor.

The Fowl character in question was watching it all from the surveillance room. There was no denying it. Things were not good. Not good at all. But certainly not irredeemable. There was still hope.

Artemis catalogued the events of the last few minutes. The manor's security had been compromised. The safe room was in a shambles, blown apart by some sort of fairy flatulence. Butler lay unconscious, possibly paralysed by the same gaseous anomaly. His hostage was loose in the house, her fairy powers restored to her. There was an unsightly creature in leather chaps burrowing holes beneath the foundations, with no apparent regard for the fairy commandments. And the People had retrieved a copy of the Book, one of several copies as it happened, including one on disk in a Swiss vault.

Artemis's finger combed an errant strand of dark hair. He would have to dig very deep to uncover the good in this particular scenario. He took several deep breaths, finding his chi as Butler had taught him.

After several moments' contemplation, he realized that these factors meant little to the overall strategies of both sides. Captain Short was still trapped in the manor. And the time-stoppage period was running out. Soon the LEP would have no option but to launch their bio-bomb, and that was when Artemis Fowl would unveil his coup de grace. Of course, the whole thing depended on Commander Root. If Root was as intellectually challenged as he looked, it was quite possible the entire scheme would collapse around his ears. Artemis hoped fervently that someone on the fairy team had the wit to spot the 'blunder' he'd made during the negotiation session.

Mulch unbuttoned his bum-flap. Time to suck some dirt, as they said down the mines. The trouble with dwarf tunnels was that they were self-sealing, so that if you had to go back the way you came, there was a whole new burrow to be excavated. Some dwarfs retraced their steps exactly, chewing through the less compact and pre-digested dirt. Mulch preferred to dig a fresh tunnel. For some reason, eating the same dirt twice didn't appeal to him.

Unhinging his jaw, the dwarf pointed himself torpedo-like through the hole in the floorboards. His heart calmed immediately as the scent of minerals filled his nostrils. Safe, he was safe. Nothing could catch a dwarf underground, not even a Skaylian rock worm. That was, of course, if he managed to get underground ...

Ten very powerful fingers gripped Mulch by the ankles. This just wasn't the dwarf's day. First wart-face, now this homicidal human. Some people never learn. Usually Mud People.

'Egg go,' he mumbled, unhinged jaw flapping uselessly.

'Not a chance,' came the reply. 'The only way you're leaving this house is in a body bag.'

Mulch could feel himself being dragged backwards. This human was strong. There weren't many creatures that could dislodge a dwarf with a grip on something. He scabbled in the dirt, cramming handfuls of wine-impregnated clay into his cavernous mouth. There was only one chance.

'Come on, you little goblin. Out of there.'

Goblin! Mulch would have been indignant had he not been busy chewing clay to eject at his enemy.

The human stopped talking. Possibly he had noticed the bum-flap, and probably the bum. No doubt what had happened in the safe room was coming back to him.

'Oh...'

What would have followed the 'Oh' is anyone's guess, but I'd be willing to bet that it wouldn't have been 'dearie nœ'. As it happened, Butler never had time to finish his expletive, because he wisely chose that moment to relinquish his grip. A wise choice indeed, because it coincided with the instant Mulch decided to launch his earthen offensive.

A lump of compacted clay sped like a cannonball directly at the spot where Butler's head had been barely a second previously. Had it still occupied that space, the impact would have separated it from Butler's shoulders. An ignoble end for a bodyguard of his calibre. As it was, the soggy missile barely grazed his ear. Nevertheless, the force was sufficient to spin Butler like an ice skater, landing him on his rump for the second time in as many minutes.

By the time his vision had settled, the dwarf had disappeared into a maelstrom of churning muck. Butler decided not to attempt pursuit. Dying below ground was not very high on his things to do list. But there will be another day, fairy, he thought grimly. And there was to be. But that's another story.

Mulch's momentum propelled him underground. He'd gone several metres along the loamy vein before he realized no one was following. Once the taste of earth had settled his heart rate, he decided it was time to implement his escape plan.

The dwarf altered his course, chewing his way towards the rabbit warren he'd noted earlier. With any luck, the centaur hadn't run a seismology test on the manor grounds, or his ruse might be discovered. He'd just have to bank on the fact that they had more important things to worry about than a missing prisoner. There shouldn't be any problem deceiving Julius, but the centaur, he was a smart one.

Mulch's internal compass steered him true, and within minutes he could feel the gentle vibrations of the rabbits loping along their tunnels. From here on timing was crucial if the illusion was to be effective. He slowed his digging rate, poking the soft clay gently until his fingers breached the tunnel wall. Mulch was careful to look the other way, because whatever he saw would be showing up on the viewscreen back in LEP HQ.

Laying his fingers on the tunnel floor like an upturned spider, Mulch waited. It didn't take long. In seconds he felt the rhythmic thump of an approaching rabbit. The instant the animal's hind legs brushed the trap, he tightened his powerful digits around its neck. The poor animal never had a chance.

Sorry, friend, thought the dwarf. If there was any other way ... Pulling the rabbit's body through the hole, Mulch rehinged his jaw and began screaming. 'Cave in! Cave in! Help! Help!'

Now for the tricky bit. With one hand he agitated the surrounding earth, bringing showers of it crumbling around his own head. With the other hand he popped the iris-cam out of his left

eye and slid it into the rabbit's. Given the almost total darkness and the pandemonium confusion, it should be almost impossible to spot the switch.

'Julius! Please. Help me.'

'Mulch! What's happening? What's your status?'

What's my status? thought the dwarf incredulously. Even in times of supposed crisis, the commander couldn't abandon his precious protocol.

'I ... Argh ...' The dwarf dragged his final scream out, petering off to a gargling rattle.

A bit melodramatic perhaps, but Mulch never could resist theatrics. With a last regretful glance at the dying animal, he unhinged his jaw and finned off to the south-east. Freedom beckoned.

CHAPTER 8: TROLL

ROOT leaned forward, roaring into the microphone. 'Mulch! What's happening? What's your status?'

Foaly was tapping a keyboard furiously.

'We've lost audio. Motion too.'

'Mulch. Talk to me, dammit.'

'I'm running a scan on his vitals ... Woah!'

'What? What is it?'

'His heart has gone crazy. Beating like a rabbit ...'

'A rabbit?'

'No, wait, it's ...'

'What?' breathed the commander, terribly afraid that he already knew.

Foaly leaned back in his chair. 'It's stopped. His heartbeat has stopped.'

'Are you sure?'

'The monitors don't lie. All vitals can be read through the iris-cam. Not a peep. He's gone.'

Root couldn't believe it. Mulch Diggums, one of life's constants. Gone? It couldn't be true.

'He did it too, you know, Foaly. Recovered a copy of the Book no less, and he confirmed Short was alive.'

Foaly's wide brow creased for an instant. 'It's just that...'

'What?' said Root, suspicion aroused.

'Well, for a moment there, just before the end, his heart rate seemed abnormally fast.'

'Maybe it was a malfunction.'

The centaur was unconvinced. 'I doubt it. My bugs don't have bugs.'

'What other explanation could there be? You still have visuals, don't you?'

'Yep. Through dead eyes, no doubt about it. Not a spark of electricity in that brain; the camera is running on its own battery.'

'Well, that's it then. No other explanation.'

Foaly nodded. 'It would seem that way. Unless ... No, it's too fantastic.'

'This is Mulch Diggums we're talking about here. Nothing is too fantastic.'

Foaly opened his mouth to voice his incredible theory, but before he could speak the shuttle's bay door slid open.

'We have him!' said a triumphant voice.

'Yes!' agreed a second. 'Fowl has made a mistake!'

Root swivelled on his chair. It was Argon and Cumulus, the so-called behavioural analysts.

'Oh, we've finally decided to earn our retainers, have we?'

But the professors were not so easily intimidated. United by excitement. Cumulus even had the temerity to wave Root's sarcasm aside. This more than anything else made the commander sit up and take notice.

Argon brushed past Foaly, pressing a laser disk into the console's player. Artemis Fowl's face appeared, as seen through Root's iris-cam.

'We'll be in touch,' said the commander's recorded voice. 'Don't worry, I'll see myself out.'

Fowl's face disappeared momentarily as he rose from his chair. Root lifted his gaze in time for the next chilling statement.

'You do that. But remember this, none of your race has permission to enter here while I'm alive.'

Argon pressed the pause button triumphantly. 'There, you see!'

Root's complexion lost any final traces of pallor.

'There? There what? What do I see?'

Cumulus tutted, as one would at a slow child. A mistake, in retrospect. The commander had him by the pointy beard in under a second.

'Now,' he said, his voice deceptively calm. 'Pretend we're pushed for time here and just explain it to me without any attitude or comments.'

'The human said we couldn't enter while he was alive,' squeaked Cumulus.

'So?'

Argon took up the account. 'So ... if we can't go in while he's alive ...'

Root drew a sharp breath. 'Then we go in when he's dead.'

Cumulus and Argon beamed. 'Exactly,' they said in perfect unison.

Root scratched his chin.

'I don't know. We're on shaky ground here legally.'

'Not at all,' argued Cumulus. 'It's elementary grammar. The human specifically stated that entry was forbidden as long as he was alive. That's tantamount to an invitation when he's dead.'

The commander wasn't convinced. 'The invitation is implied, at best.'

'No,' interrupted Foaly. 'They're right. It's a strong case. Once Fowl is dead, the door is wide open. He said it himself.'

'Maybe.'

'Maybe nothing,' blurted Foaly. 'For heaven's sake, Julius, how much more do you need? We have a crisis here, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Root nodded slowly. 'One, you're right. Two, I'm going to run with it. Three, well done, you two. And four, if you ever call me Julius again, Foaly, you'll be eating your own hooves. Now, get me a line to the Council. I need to get approval for that gold.'

'Right away, Commander Root, your worship.' Foaly grinned, letting the hoof-eating comment slide for Holly's sake.

'So we send in the gold,' muttered Root, thinking aloud. 'They send out Holly, we blue-rinse the place and stroll in to reclaim the ransom. Simple.'

'So simple it's brilliant,' enthused Argon. 'Quite a coup for our profession, wouldn't you say, Doctor Cumulus?'

Cumulus's head was spinning with possibilities. 'Lecture tours, book deals. Why, the movie rights alone will be worth a fortune.'

'Let those sociologists stuff this in their collective pipe. Puts the kibosh on the deprivation-breeds-antisocial-behaviour chestnut. This Fowl character has never gone hungry in his life.'

'There's more than one kind of hunger,' noted Argon.

'Very true. Hunger to succeed. Hunger to dominate. Hunger to -'

Root snapped. 'Get out! Get out before I strangle the pair of you. And if I ever hear a word of this repeated on an afternoon talk show, I'll know where it came from.'

The consultants retreated warily, resolving not to call their agents until they were out of earshot.

'I don't know if the Council will go for this,' admitted Root when they'd departed. 'It's a lot of gold.'

Foaly looked up from the console. 'How much exactly?'

The commander slid a piece of paper across the console. 'That much.'

'That is a lot.' Foaly whistled. 'A tonne. Small unmarked ingots. Twenty-four carat only. Well, at least it's a nice round weight.'

'Very comforting. I'll be sure to mention that to the Council. Have you got that line yet?'

The centaur grunted. A negative grunt. Very cheeky really, grunting at a superior officer. Root didn't have the energy to discipline him, but he made a mental note: when this is over, dock Foaly's pay for a few decades. He rubbed his eyes exhaustedly. Time lag was beginning to set in. Even though his brain wouldn't let him sleep because he'd been awake when the time-stop was initiated, his body was crying out for rest.

He rose from the chair, swinging the door wide to let in some air. Stale. Time-stop air. Not even molecules could escape the time-field, much less a human boy.

There was activity by the portal. Lots of it. A swarm of troops gathered around a hovercage. Gudgeon stood at the head of the procession and the entire bunch was heading his way. Root stepped down to meet them.

'What's this?' he inquired, none too pleasantly. 'A circus?'

Gudgeon's face was pale, but determined.

'No, Julius. It's the end of the circus.'

Root nodded. 'I see. And these are the clowns?'

Foaly's head poked through the doorway.

'Pardon me for interrupting your extended circus metaphor, but what the hell is that?'

'Yes, Lieutenant,' said Root, nodding at the floating hovercage. 'What the hell is that?'

Gudgeon bolstered his courage with a few deep breaths. 'I've taken a leaf from your book, Julius.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Yes. It is. You opted to send in a lapsed creature. So now I'm going to.'

Root smiled dangerously. 'You don't opt to do anything, Lieutenant, not without my say so.'

Gudgeon took an unconscious step backwards.

'I've been to the Council, Julius. I have their full backing.'

The commander turned to Foaly. 'Is this true?'

'Apparently. It just came through on the outside line. This is Gudgeon's party now. He told the Council about the ransom demand and you springing Mister Diggums. You know what the elders are like when it comes to parting with gold.'

Root folded his arms. 'People told me about you, Gudgeon. They said you'd stab me in the back. I didn't believe them. I was a fool.'

'This is not about us, Julius. It's about the mission. What's inside this cage is our best chance of success.'

'So what's in the cage? No, don't tell me. The only other non-magical creature in the Lower Elements. And the first troll we've managed to take alive in over a century.'

'Exactly. The perfect creature to flush out our adversary.'

Root's cheeks glowed with the effort of restraining his anger.

'I don't believe you're even considering this.'

'Face it, Julius, it's the same basic idea as yours.'

'No, it isn't. Mulch Diggums made his own choices. He knew the risks.'

'Diggums is dead?'

Root rubbed his eyes again. 'Yes. It would seem so. A cave-in.'

'That just proves I'm right. A troll won't be so easily dispatched.'

'It's a dumb animal, for heaven's sake! How can a troll follow instructions?'

Gudgeon smiled, newborn confidence peeping through his apprehension.

'What instructions? We just point it at the house and get out of the way. I guarantee you those humans will be begging us to come in and rescue them.'

'And what about my officer?'

'We'll have the troll back under lock and key long before Captain Short is in any danger.'

'You can guarantee that, can you?'

Gudgeon paused. 'That's a chance I'm willing ... the Council is willing to take.'

'Politics,' spat Root. 'This is all politics to you, Gudgeon. A nice feather in your cap on the way to a Council seat. You make me sick.'

'Be that as it may, we are proceeding with this strategy. The Council have appointed me Acting Commander, so if you can't put our personal history aside, get the hell out of my way.'

Root stepped aside. 'Don't worry, Commander. I don't want anything to do with this butchery. The credit is all yours.'

Gudgeon put on his best sincere face. 'Julius, despite what you think, I have only the interests of the People at heart.'

'One person in particular,' snorted Root.

Gudgeon decided to go for the high moral ground.

'I don't have to stand here listening to this. Every second talking to you is a second wasted.'

Root looked him straight in the eye. 'That's about six hundred years wasted altogether, eh, friend!'

Gudgeon didn't answer. What could he say? Ambition had a price, and that price was friendship.

Gudgeon turned to his squad, a group of hand-picked sprites loyal only to him. 'Get the hovercage over to the avenue. We don't green-light until I give the word.'

He brushed past Root, eyes looking anywhere except at his erstwhile friend. Foaly wouldn't let him go without a comment.

'Hey, Gudgeon.'

The Acting Commander couldn't tolerate that tone, not on his first day.

'You watch your mouth, Foaly. No one is indispensable.'

The centaur chuckled. 'Very true. That's the thing about politics, you get one shot.'

Gudgeon was semi-interested in spite of himself.

'I know if it was me,' continued Foaly, 'and I had one chance, just one chance, to book my behind a seat on that Council, I certainly wouldn't entrust my future to a troll.'

And suddenly Gudgeon's new-found confidence evaporated, replaced by a shiny pallor. He wiped his brow, hurrying after the departing hovercage.

'See you tomorrow,' Foaly called after him. 'You'll be taking out my trash.'

Root laughed. Possibly the first time one of Foaly's comments had amused him.

'Good man, Foaly.' He grinned. 'Hit that back-stabber where it hurts, right in the ambition.'

'Thanks, Julius.'

The grin disappeared faster than a deep-fried pit slug in the LEP canteen.

'I've warned you about the Julius thing, Foaly. Now get that outside line open again. I want that gold ready when Gudgeon's plan goes awry. Lobby all my supporters on the Council. I'm pretty sure Lope's one of mine, and Cahartez, possibly Vinyaya. She's always had a thing for me, devilishly attractive as I am.'

'You're joking, of course.'

'I never joke,' said Root, and he said it with a straight face.

Holly had a plan, of sorts. Sneak around shielded, reclaim some fairy weaponry, then cause havoc until Fowl was forced to release her. And if several million Irish pounds' worth of property damage happened to ensue, well, that was just a bonus.

Holly hadn't felt so good in years. Her eyes blazed with power and there were sparks sizzling below every centimetre of skin. She had forgotten just how good running hot felt.

Captain Short felt in control now, on the hunt. This was what she was trained to do. When this affair had started, the advantage had been with the Mud People. But now the boot was on the other foot. She was the hunter and they were the prey.

Holly scaled the great staircase, ever vigilant for the giant manservant. That was one individual she wasn't taking any chances with. If those fingers closed around her skull, she was history, helmet or not, assuming she managed to find a helmet.

The vast house was like a mausoleum - without a single sign of life inside its vaulted rooms. Spooky portraits though. Each one with Fowl eyes, suspicious and glittering. Holly determined to torch the lot of them when she recovered her Neutrino 2000. Vindictive perhaps, but totally justified considering what Artemis Fowl had put her through.

She scaled the steps swiftly, following the curve around to the upper landing. A slot of pale light peeped from under the last door on the corridor. Holly placed her palm against the wood, feeling for vibration. Activity all right. Shouting and footsteps. Thundering this way.

Holly jumped back, flattening herself against the velveteen wallpaper. Not a moment too soon. A hulking shape burst through the doorway and hurtled down the corridor, leaving a maelstrom of air currents in his wake.

'Juliet!' he shouted, his sister's name hanging in the air long after he had disappeared down the stairs.

Don't worry, Butler, thought Holly. She's having the time of her life glued to Wrestlemania. But the open door presented a welcome opportunity. She slipped through before the mechanical arm could close it again.

Artemis Fowl was waiting, anti-shield filters cobbled on to his sunglasses.

'Good evening, Captain Short,' he began, confidence apparently intact. 'At the risk of sounding clichéd, I've been expecting you.'

Holly didn't respond, didn't even look her jailer in the eye. Instead she utilized her training to scan the room, her gaze resting briefly on each surface.

'You are, of course, still bound by the promises made earlier tonight ...'

But Holly wasn't listening, she was sprinting towards a stainless-steel workbench bolted to the far wall.

'So, basically, our situation hasn't changed. You are still my hostage.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' muttered Holly, running her fingers over the rows of confiscated Retrieval equipment. She selected a stealth-coated helmet, slipping it over her pointed ears. The pneumatic pads pumped to cradle her crown. She was safe now. Any further commands given by Fowl meant nothing through the reflective visor. A wire mike slotted down automatically. Contact was immediate.

'... on revolving frequencies. Broadcasting on revolving frequencies. Holly, if you can hear me, take cover.'

Holly recognized Foaly's voice. Something familiar in a crazy situation.

'Repeat. Take cover. Gudgeon is sending in a ...'

'Something I should know?' said Artemis.

'Quiet,' hissed Holly, worried by the tone of Foaly's usually flippant voice.

'I say again, they are sending in a troll to secure your release.'

Holly started. Gudgeon was calling the shots now. Not good news at all.

Fowl interrupted again.

'It's not polite, you know. Ignoring your host.'

Holly snarled. 'Enough is enough.'

She pulled back her fist, fingers curled in a tight bunch. Artemis didn't flinch. Why would he? Butler always intervened before punches landed. But then something caught his eye, a large figure running down the stairway on the first-floor monitor. It was Butler.

'That's right, rich boy,' said Holly nastily. 'You're on your own this time.'

And before Artemis's eyes had time to widen, Holly put an extra few kilos of spring in her elbow and whacked her abductor right on the nose.

'Oof,' he said, collapsing on to his rear end.

'Oh yes! That felt good.'

Holly focused on the voice buzzing in her ear.

'... we've been feeding a loop to the outside cameras, so the humans won't see anything come up the avenue. But it's on the way, trust me.'

'Foaly. Foaly, come in.'

'Holly? Is that you?'

'The one and only. Foaly, there is no loop. I can see everything that's going on around here.'

'The cunning little ... He must have rebooted the system.'

The avenue was a hive of fairy activity. Gudgeon was there, haughtily directing his team of sprites. And in the centre of the melee stood a five-metre-tall hovercage, floating on a cushion of air. The cage was directly before the manor door, and the techies were securing a concussor seal to the surrounding wall. When activated, several alloy rods in the seal's collar would be detonated simultaneously, effectively disintegrating the door. When the dust settled, the troll would have only one place to go into the manor.

Holly checked the other monitors. Butler had managed to drag Juliet from the cell. They had ascended from the cellar level and were just crossing the lobby. Right in the line of fire.

'D'Arvit,' she swore, crossing to the work surface.

Artemis was propped on his elbows. 'You hit me,' he said in disbelief.

Holly strapped on a set of Hummingbirds.

'That's right, Fowl. And there's plenty more where that came from. So stay right where you are, if you know what's good for you.'

For once in his life, Artemis realized that he didn't have a snappy answer. He opened his mouth, waiting for his brain to supply the customary pithy comeback. But nothing arrived.

Holly slipped the Neutrino 2000 into its holster.

'That's right, Mud Boy. Playtime's over. Time for the professionals to take over. If you're a good boy I'll buy you a lolly when I come back.'

And when Holly was long gone, soaring beneath the hallway's ancient oak beams, Artemis said, 'I don't like lollipops.'

It was a woefully inadequate response, and Artemis was instantly appalled with himself. Pathetic really: I don't like lollipops. No self-respecting criminal mastermind would be caught dead even using the word lollipops. He really would have to put together a database of witty responses for occasions such as this.

It was quite possible that Artemis would have sat like that for some time, totally detached from the situation at hand, had not the front door imploded, shaking the manor to its foundations. A thing like that is enough to knock the daydreams from anyone's head.

A sprite alighted before Acting Commander Gudgeon.

'The collar is in place, sir.'

Gudgeon nodded. 'Are you sure it's tight, Captain? I don't want that troll coming out the wrong way.'

'Tighter 'n a goblin's wallet. There's not a bubble of air getting through that seal. Tighter 'n a stink-worm's -'

'Very well, Captain,' interrupted Gudgeon hurriedly, before the sprite could complete his graphic analogy.

Beside them the hovercage shook violently, almost toppling the container from its air cushion.

'We better blow that sucker, Commander. If we don't let him outta there soon, my boys're gonna spend the next week scraping ...'

'Fine, Captain, fine. Blow it. Blow it for goodness' sake.'

Gudgeon hurried behind the blast shield, scribbling a note on his palmtop's LCD screen. Memo: Remind the sprites to watch their language. After all, I am a Commander now.

The foul-mouthed captain in question turned to the hovercage's cab driver.

'Blow 'er, Chix. Blow the door off its damn hinges.'

'Yessir. Off its damn hinges. That's a roger.'

Gudgeon winced. There'd be a general meeting tomorrow. First thing. By then he'd have the commander's icon on his lapel. Even a sprite might be less likely to curse, with the triple acorn logo winking in his face.

Chix pulled down his shrapnel goggles, even though the cab had a quartz windscreen. The goggles were cool. Girls loved them. Or so the driver thought. In his mind's eye he saw himself as a grim-faced daredevil. Sprites were like that. Give a fairy a pair of wings and he thinks he's God's gift to women. But Chix Verbil's ill-fated quest to impress the dames is, once again, another story. In this particular tale, he serves only one purpose. And that is to melodramatically push the detonate button. Which he does, with great aplomb.

Two dozen controlled charges detonated in their chambers, driving two dozen alloy cylinders out of their mounts at over a thousand miles per hour. Upon impact, each bar pulverized the contact area plus the surrounding fifteen centimetres, effectively blowing the door off its damn hinges. As the captain would say.

When the dust settled, the handlers winched back the containment wall inside the cage and began hammering the side panels with the flats of their hands.

Gudgeon peeped out from behind the blast shield.

'All clear, Captain?'

'Just a damn second, Commander. Chix? How're we doin'?'

Chix checked the cab's monitor.

'He's movin'. The hammerin' is spookin' him. The claws are comin' out. My, he's a big sucker. I wouldn't wanna be that Recon babe if she gets in the way of this.'

Gudgeon felt a momentary pang of guilt, which he dispelled with his favourite daydream - a vision of himself sinking into a beige-velour Council seat.

The cage heaved violently, almost dislodging Chix from his seat. He held on like a rodeo rider.

'Woah! He's on the move. Lock and load, boys. I have a feeling that any second we're going to be gettin' a cry for help.'

Gudgeon didn't bother locking and loading. He preferred to leave that sort of thing to the foot soldiers. The Acting Commander considered himself too important to be risked in an insecure situation. For the good of the People in general, it was better he remain outside the op zone.

Butler took the stairs four at a time. It was possibly the first time he had ever abandoned Master Artemis in a crisis. But Juliet was family, and there was obviously something seriously wrong with his baby sister. That fairy had said something to her and now she was just sitting in the cell giggling. Butler feared the worst. If anything were to happen to Juliet, he didn't know how he'd live with himself.

He felt a dribble of sweat slide down the crown of his shaven head. This whole situation was shooting off in bizarre directions. Fairies, magic, and now a hostage loose in the manor. How could he be expected to control things? It took a four-man team to guard the lowliest politician, but he was expected to contain this impossible situation on his own.

Butler sprinted down the corridor into what had until recently been Captain Short's cell. Juliet was sprawled on the cot, enraptured by a concrete wall.

'What are you doing?' he gasped, drawing the Sig Sauer nine-millimetre with practised ease.

His sister barely spared him a glance. 'Quiet, you big ape. Louie the Love Machine is on. He ain't so tough, I could take him.'

Butler blinked. She was talking gibberish. Obviously drugged.

'Let's go. Artemis wants us upstairs in the situations room.'

Juliet pointed a manicured finger at the wall.

'Artemis can wait. This is for the intercontinental title. And it's a grudge match. Louie ate the Hogman's pet piggie.'

The manservant studied the wall. It was definitely blank. He didn't have time for this.

'Right. Let's go,' he growled, slinging his sister over a broad shoulder.

'Nooo. You big bully,' she protested, hammering his back with tiny fists. 'Not now. Hogman! Hogmaaaan!'

Butler ignored the objections, settling into a loping run. Who the hell was this Hogman person? One of her boyfriends no doubt. He was going to keep closer tabs on callers to the lodge in future.

'Butler? Pick up.'

It was Artemis, on the hand-held. Butler jiggled his sister up a foot so he could reach his belt.

'Lollipops!' barked his employer.

'Say again. I thought you said -'

'Eh ... I mean get out of there. Take cover! Take cover!'

Take cover? The military term didn't sound right coming out of Master Artemis's mouth. Like a diamond ring in a Lucky Bag.

'Take cover?'

'Yes, Butler. Cover. I thought speaking in primal terms would be the quickest route to your cognitive functions. Obviously I was mistaken.'

That was more like it. Butler scanned the hall for a nook to duck into. Not much choice. The only shelter was provided by the suits of medieval armour punctuating the walls. The manservant ducked into the alcove behind a fourteenth-century knight complete with lance and mace.

Juliet tapped the breastplate.

'You think you're mean? I could take you with one hand.'

'Quiet,' hissed Butler.

He held his breath and listened. Something was approaching the main door. Something big. Butler leaned out far enough to get one eye on the lobby ...

Then you could say that the doorway exploded. But that particular verb doesn't do the action justice. Rather, it shattered into infinitesimal pieces. Butler had seen something like this once before when a force-seven earthquake had rippled through a Colombian drug lord's estate seconds before he had been scheduled to blow it up. This was slightly different. More localized. Very professional. It was classic anti-terrorist tactics. Hit 'em with smoke and sonics, then go in while the targets were disoriented. Whatever was coming, it would be bad. He was certain of it. He was absolutely right.

Dust clouds settled slowly, depositing a pale sheet on the Tunisian rug. Madam Fowl would have been furious, if she ever put so much as a toe outside the attic door. Butler's instincts told him to move. Zigzag across the ground floor, make for the higher ground. Stay low to

minimize the target. This would be the perfect time to do it, before visibility cleared. Any second now, a hail of bullets would be whistling through the archway, and the last place he wanted to be was pinned down on a lower level.

And on any other day Butler would have moved. He would've been halfway up that stairway before his brain had time for second thoughts. But today he had his baby sister over his shoulder spouting gibberish, and the last thing he wanted to do was expose her to murderous assault fire. With Juliet in the state she was in, she'd probably challenge the fairy commandos to a tag-wrestling match. And though his sister talked tough, she was just a kid really. No match for trained military personnel. So Butler hunkered down, propped Juliet against a tapestry behind a suit of armour and checked his safety catch. Off. Good. Come and get me, fairy boys.

Something moved in the dust haze. It was immediately obvious to Butler that the something wasn't human. The manservant had been on too many safaris not to recognize an animal when he saw it. He studied the creature's gait. Possibly simian. Similar upper-body structure to an ape, but bigger than any primate Butler had ever seen. If it was an ape, then his handgun wasn't going to be of much use. You could put five rounds in the skull of a bull ape and he'd still have time to eat you before his brain realized he was dead.

But it wasn't an ape. Apes didn't have night eyes. This creature did. Glowing crimson pupils, half-hidden behind shaggy forelocks. Tusks too, but not elephantine. These were curved, with serrated edges. Gutting weapons. Butler felt a tingle low in his stomach. He'd had the feeling once before. On his first day at the Swiss academy. It was fear.

The creature stepped clear of the dust haze. Butler gasped. Again, his first since the academy. This was like no adversary he'd ever faced before. The manservant realized instantly what the fairies had done. They had sent in a primal hunter. A creature with no interest in magic or rules. A thing that would simply kill anything in its way, regardless of species. This was the perfect predator. That much was clear from the meat-ripping points on its teeth, from the dried gore crusted beneath its claws and from the distilled hatred spilling from its eyes.

The troll shambled forwards, squinting through the chandelier light. Yellowed claws scraped along the marble tiling, throwing up sparks in their wake. It was sniffing now, snorting curious breaths, head cocked to one side. Butler had seen that pose before - on the snouts of starved pit bulls, just before their Russian handlers set them loose on a bear hunt.

The shaggy head froze, its snout pointed directly at Butler's hiding place. It was no coincidence. The manservant peeked out between the chain-mail fingers of a gauntlet. Now came the stalk. Once a scent had been acquired, the predator would attempt a slow silent approach, before the lightning strike.

But apparently the troll had not read the predator's handbook, because it didn't bother with the stealth approach, jumping directly to the lightning strike. Moving faster than Butler would have believed possible, the troll sprang across the lobby, brushing the medieval armour aside as though it were a shop mannequin.

Juliet blinked. 'Ooh,' she gasped. 'It's Bigfoot Bob. Canadian champion nineteen ninety-eight. I thought you were in the Andes, looking for your relatives.'

Butler didn't bother to correct her. His sister wasn't lucid. At least she would die happy. While his brain was contemplating this morbid observation, Butler's gun hand was coming up.

He squeezed the trigger as rapidly as the Sig Sauer's mechanism would allow. Two in the chest, three between the eyes. That was the plan. He got the chest shots in, but the troll interfered before Butler could complete the formation. The interference took the form of scything tusks that ducked below Butler's guard. They coiled around his trunk, slicing through his Kevlar reinforced jacket like a razor through rice paper.

Butler felt a cold pain as the serrated ivory pierced his chest. He knew immediately that the wound was fatal. His breath came hard. That was a lung gone, and gouts of blood were matting the troll's fur. His blood. No one could lose that amount and live. Nevertheless, the pain was instantly replaced by a curious euphoria. Some form of natural anaesthetic injected through channels in the beast's tusks. More dangerous than the deadliest poison. In minutes Butler would not only stop struggling, but go giggling to his grave.

The manservant fought against the narcotics in his system, struggling furiously in the troll's grip. But it was no use. His fight was over almost before it had begun.

The troll grunted, flipping the limp human body over his head. Butler's burly frame collided with the wall at a speed human bones were never meant to withstand. The bricks cracked from floor to ceiling. Butler's spine went too. Now, even if the blood loss didn't get him, paralysis would.

Juliet was still enthralled by the mesmer.

'Come on, brother. Get off the canvas. We all know you're faking.'

The troll paused, some basic curiosity piqued by the lack of fear. He would have suspected a trick, if he could have formulated such a complicated thought. But in the end, appetite won out. This creature smelled flesh. Fresh and tender. Flesh from above ground was different. Laced with surface smells. Once you've had open-air meat, it's hard to go back. The troll ran a tongue over his incisors and reached out a shaggy hand ...

Holly tucked the Hummingbirds close to her torso, dropping into a controlled dive. She skimmed the banisters, emerging into the portico below a stained-glass dome. The time-stop light filtered unnaturally, splitting into thick azure shafts.

Light, thought Holly. The helmet high-beams worked before, there was no reason why they wouldn't work again. It was too late for the male, he was a bag of broken bones. But the female, she still had a few seconds left before the troll split her open.

Holly spiralled down through the faux light, searching her helmet console for the Sonix button. Sonix were generally used on canines, but in this case it might provide a moment's distraction. Enough to get her to ground level.

The troll was reaching in towards Juliet underhand. It was a move generally reserved for the defenceless. The claws would curl in below the ribs, rupturing the heart. Minimum damage to the flesh and no last-minute tension to toughen the meat.

Holly activated her Sonix ... and nothing happened. Not good. Generally your average troll would be at the very least irritated by the ultra-high-frequency tone. But this particular beast didn't even shake his shaggy head. There were a couple of possibilities: one, the helmet was malfunctioning; two, this troll was deaf as the proverbial post. Unfortunately, Holly had no way of knowing as the tones were inaudible to fairy ears.

Whatever the problem, it forced Holly to adopt a strategy she would rather not have resorted to. Direct contact. All to save a human's life. She'd gone section eight. Without a doubt.

Holly jerked the throttle, straight from fourth to reverse. Not very good for the gears. She'd get a dressing-down from the mechanics for that, in the unlikely event she actually survived this never-ending nightmare. The effect of this gear-crunching was to flip her around in mid-air, so that her boot heels were pointed directly at the troll's head. Holly winced. Two entanglements with the same troll. Unbelievable.

Her heels caught the beast square on the crown of its head. At that speed, there was at least half a tonne of G-force behind the contact. Only the reinforced ribbing in her suit prevented Holly's leg bones from shattering. Even so, she heard her knee pop. The pain clawed its way to her forehead. Ruined her recovery manoeuvre too. Instead of repelling herself to a safe altitude, Holly crumpled on to the troll's back, becoming instantly entangled in the ropy fur.

The troll was suitably annoyed. Not only had something distracted it from dinner, but now that something was nestled in its fur, along with the cleaner slugs. The beast straightened, reaching a clawed hand over its own shoulder. The curved nails raked Holly's helmet, scoring parallel grooves in the alloy. Juliet was safe for the moment, but Holly had taken her place on the endangered-individuals list.

The troll squeezed tighter, somehow securing a grip on the helmet's anti-friction coating, which, according to Foaly, was impossible to grip. Serious words would be had. If not in this life, then definitely the next.

Captain Short found herself being hoisted aloft to face her old enemy. Holly struggled to concentrate through the pain and confusion. Her leg was swinging like a pendulum, and the troll's breath was breaking over her face in rancid waves.

There had been a plan, hadn't there? Surely she didn't fly down here just to curl up and die. There must have been a strategy. All those years in the Academy must have taught her something. Whatever her plan had been, it floated just out of reach somewhere between pain and shock. Out of reach.

'The lights, Holly ...'

A voice in her head. Probably talking to herself. An out-of-head experience. Ha ha. She must remember to tell Foaly about this ... Foaly?

'Hit the lights, Holly. If those tusks get to work, you'll be dead before the magic can kick in.'

'Foaly? Is that you?' Holly may have said this aloud, or she may just have thought it. She wasn't sure.

'The tunnel high beams, Captain!' A different voice. Not so cuddly. 'Hit the button now! That's an order!'

Oops. It was Root. She was falling down on the job again. First Hamburg, then Martina Franca, now this.

'Yessir,' she mumbled, trying to sound professional.

'Press it! Now, Captain Short!'

Holly looked the troll straight in its merciless eyes and pressed the button. Very melodramatic. Or it would have been, if the lights had worked. Unfortunately for Holly, in her haste she'd grabbed one of the helmets cannibalized by Artemis Fowl. Hence no Sonix, no filters and no tunnel beams. The halogen bulbs were still installed, but the wires had come loose during Artemis's investigations.

'Oh dear,' breathed Holly.

'Oh dear!' barked Root. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'The beams are off-line,' explained Foaly.

'Oh ...' Root's voice trailed off. What more was there to say?

Holly squinted at the troll. If you didn't know trolls were dumb animals, you'd swear the beast was grinning. Standing there with blood dripping from various chest wounds, grinning. Captain Short didn't like being grinned at.

'Laugh this off,' she said, and butted the troll with the only weapon available to her. Her helmeted head.

Valiant undoubtedly, but about as effective as trying to cut down a tree with a feather. Luckily, the ill-advised blow had a side effect. For a split second, two strands of conductor filament connected, sending power flooding to one of the tunnel beams. Four-hundred watts of white light blasted through the troll's crimson eyes, dispatching lightning rods of agony to the brain.

'Heh heh,' mumbled Holly, in the second before the troll convulsed involuntarily. Its spasms sent her spinning across the parquet floor, leg jittering along behind her.

The wall was approaching at an alarming speed. Maybe, thought Holly hopefully, this will be one of those impacts where you don't feel any pain until later. No, replied her pessimistic side, afraid not. She slammed into a Norman narrative tapestry, bringing it tumbling down on top of her. Pain was immediate and overwhelming.

'Ooof,' grunted Foaly. 'I felt that. Visuals are shot. Pain sensors went right off the scale. Your lungs are busted, Captain. We're going to lose you for a while. But don't worry, Holly, your magic should be kicking in already.'

Holly felt the blue tingle of magic scurrying to her various injuries. Thank the gods for acorns. But it was too little too late. The pain was way beyond her threshold. Just before

unconsciousness claimed her, Holly's hand flopped from beneath the tapestry. It landed on Butler's arm, touching the bare skin. Amazingly, the human wasn't dead. A dogged pulse forced the blood through smashed limbs.

Heal, thought Holly. And the magic scurried down her fingers.

The troll faced a dilemma - which female to eat first. Choices, choices. This decision was not made any easier by the lingering agony buzzing around its shaggy head, or the cluster of bullets lodged in the fatty chest tissue. Eventually it settled on the surface dweller. Soft human meat. No dense fairy muscle to chew through.

The beast squatted low, tilting the girl's chin with one yellowed talon. A pulsing jugular looped lazily down the length of her neck. The heart or the neck? the troll wondered. The neck, it was closer. It turned the talon sideways, so that the edge pressed against soft human flesh. One sharp swipe and the girl's own heartbeat would drive the blood from her body.

Butler woke up, which was a surprise in itself. He knew immediately that he was alive, because of the searing pain permeating every cubic centimetre of his body. This was not good. Alive he may have been, but considering the fact that his neck had a one-eighty twist on it, he'd never so much as walk the dog again, not to mention rescue his sister.

The manservant twiddled his fingers. Hurt like hell, but at least there was movement. It was amazing that he had any motor functions at all, considering the trauma his spinal column had suffered. His toes seemed all right too, but that could have been phantom response, given that he couldn't actually see them.

The bleeding from his chest wound appeared to have stopped and he was thinking straight. All in all, he was in much better shape than he had any right to be. What in heaven's name was going on here?

Butler noticed something. There were blue sparks dancing along his torso. He must be hallucinating, creating pleasant images to distract himself from the inevitable. A very realistic hallucination, it must be said.

The sparks congregated at trauma points, sinking into the skin. Butler shuddered. This was no hallucination. Something extraordinary was happening here. Magical.

Magic? That rang a bell in his recently reassembled cranium. Fairy magic. Something was healing his wounds. He twisted his head, wincing at the grate of sliding vertebrae. There was a hand resting on his forearm. Sparks flowed from the slim elfin fingers, intuitively targeting bruises, breaks or ruptures. There were a lot of injuries to be dealt with, but the tiny sparks handled it all quickly and effectively. Like an army of mystical beavers repairing storm damage.

Butler could actually feel his bones knitting and the blood retreating from semi-congealed scabs. His head twisted involuntarily as his vertebrae slid into their niches, and strength returned in a rush as magic reproduced the three litres of blood lost through his chest wound.

Butler jumped to his feet - actually jumped. He was himself again. No. It was more than that. He was as strong as he had ever been. Strong enough to have another crack at that beast hunkered over his baby sister.

He felt his rejuvenated heart speed up like the stroke of an outboard motor. Calm, Butler told himself. Passion is the enemy of efficiency. But calm or no, the situation was desperate. This beast had already effectively killed him once, and this time round he didn't even have the Sig Sauer. His own skills aside, it would be nice to have a weapon. Something with a bit of weight to it. His boot clinked on a metallic object. Butler glanced down at the debris strewn in the troll's wake ... Perfect.

There was nothing but snow on the viewscreen. 'Come on,' urged Root. 'Hurry up!'

Foaly elbowed past his superior.

'Maybe if you didn't insist on blocking all the circuit boards.'

Root shuffled out of the way grudgingly. In his mind it was the circuit boards' fault for being behind him. The centaur's head disappeared into an access panel.

'Anything?'

'Nothing. Just interference.'

Root slapped the screen. Not a good idea. First, because there was not one chance in a million that it would actually help, and second, because plasma screens grow extremely hot after prolonged use.

'D'Arvit!'

'Don't touch that screen, by the way.'

'Oh, ha ha. We have time for jokes now, do we?'

'No, actually. Anything?'

The snow settled into recognizable shapes.

'That's it, hold it there. We've got a signal.'

'I've activated the secondary camera. Plain old video, I'm afraid, but it'll have to do.'

Root didn't comment. He was watching the screen. This must be a movie. It couldn't be real life.

'So what's going on in there? Anything interesting?'

Root tried to answer, but his soldier's vocabulary just didn't have the superlatives.

'What? What is it?'

The commander made an attempt. 'It's ... the human ... I've never ... Oh, forget it, Foaly. You're going to have to see this for yourself.'

Holly watched the entire episode through a gap in the tapestry folds. If she hadn't seen it, she wouldn't have believed it. In fact, it wasn't until she'd reviewed the VT for her report that she was certain the whole thing wasn't a hallucination brought on by a near-death experience. As it was, the video sequence became something of a legend, initially doing the rounds on the Amateur Home Movies cable shows and ending up on the LEP Academy Hand-to-hand curriculum.

The human, Butler, was strapping on a medieval suit of armour. Incredible as it seemed, he apparently intended going toe to toe with the troll. Holly tried to warn him, tried to make some sound, but the magic hadn't yet reinflated her crushed lungs.

Butler closed his visor, hefting a vicious mace.

'Now,' he grunted through the grille. 'I'll show you what happens when someone lays a hand on my sister.'

The human twirled the mace as though it were a cheerleader's baton, ramming it home between the troll's shoulder blades. A blow like that, while not fatal, certainly distracted the troll from its intended victim.

Butler planted his foot just above the creature's haunches and tugged the weapon free. It relinquished its grip with a sickly sucking sound. He skipped backwards, settling into a defensive stance.

The troll rounded on him, all ten talons sliding out to their full extent. Drops of venom glistened from the tip of each tusk. Playtime was over. But there would be no lightning strike this time. The beast was wary, it had been hurt. This latest attacker would be afforded the same respect as another male of the species. As far as the troll was concerned, his territory was being encroached on. And there was only one way of solving a dispute of this nature. The same way that trolls solved every dispute ...

'I must warn you,' said Butler, straight-faced. 'I am armed and prepared to use deadly force if necessary.'

Holly would have groaned if she could. Banter! The human was trying to engage a troll in macho repartee! Then Captain Short realized her mistake. The words weren't important, it was the tone he employed. Calm, soothing. Like a trainer with a spooked unicorn.

'Step away from the female. Easy now.'

The troll ballooned its cheeks and howled. Scare tactics. Testing the waters. Butler didn't flinch.

'Yeah, yeah. Real scary. Now just back out of the door, and I won't have to cut you into little pieces.'

The troll snorted, miffed by this reaction. Generally his roar sent whatever creature was facing it scurrying down the tunnel.

'One step at a time. Nice and slow. Easy there, big fellow.'

You could almost see it in the troll's eyes. A flicker of uncertainty. Maybe this human was ...

And that was when Butler struck. He danced under the tusks, hammering home a devastating uppercut with his medieval weapon. The troll staggered backwards, talons flailing wildly. But it was too late: Butler had stepped out of reach, scooting across to the other side of the corridor.

The troll lumbered after him, spitting dislodged teeth from pulped gums. Butler sank to his knees, sliding and turning, the polished floor bearing him like an ice skater. He ducked and pirouetted, facing his pursuer.

'Guess what I found?' he said, raising the Sig Sauer.

No chest shots this time. Butler laid in the rest of the automatic's clip in a ten-centimetre diameter between the troll's eyes. Unfortunately for Butler, due to millennia spent butting each other, trolls have developed a thick ridge of bone covering their brows. So his textbook spread failed to penetrate the skull, in spite of the Teflon-coated load.

However, ten Devastator slugs can't be ignored by any creature on the planet, and the troll was no exception. The bullets beat a sledgehammer tattoo on its cranium causing instant concussion. The animal staggered backwards, slapping at its own forehead. Butler was after it in a heartbeat, pinning one shaggy foot beneath the mace spikes.

The troll was concussed, blinded by blood, and lame. A normal person would feel a shard of remorse, but not Butler. He'd seen too many men gored by injured animals. Now was the dangerous time. It was no time for mercy, it was time to terminate with extreme prejudice.

Holly could only watch helplessly as the human took careful aim and delivered a series of crippling blows to the stricken creature. First he took out the tendons, bringing the troll to its knees, then he abandoned the mace and went to work with gauntleted hands, perhaps deadlier than the mace had been. The unfortunate troll fought back pathetically, even managing to land a few glancing blows. But they failed to penetrate the antique armour. Meanwhile Butler toiled like a surgeon. Working on the assumption that the troll and human physiques were basically the same, he rained blow after blow on the dumb creature, reducing it to a heap of quivering fur in so many seconds. It was pitiful to watch. And the manservant wasn't finished yet. He stripped off the bloodied gauntlets, loading a fresh clip into the handgun.

'Let's see how much bone you have under your chin.'

'No,' gasped Holly, with the first breath in her body. 'Don't.'

Butler ignored her, jamming the barrel beneath the troll's jaw.

'Don't do it ... You owe me.'

Butler paused. Juliet was alive, it was true. Confused certainly, but alive. He thumbed the hammer on his pistol. Every brain cell in his head screamed for him to pull the trigger. But Juliet was alive.

'You owe me, human.'

Butler sighed. He'd regret this later.

'Very well, Captain. The beast lives to fight another day. Lucky for him, I'm in a good mood.'

Holly made a noise. It was somewhere between a whimper and a chuckle.

'Now let's get rid of our hairy friend.'

Butler rolled the unconscious troll on to an armour trolley, dragging it to the devastated doorway. With a huge heave, he jettisoned the lot into the suspended night.

'And don't come back,' he shouted.

'Amazing,' said Root.

'Tell me about it,' agreed Foaly.

CHAPTER 9: ACE IN THE HOLE

ARTEMIS tried the doorknob and got a scorched palm for his trouble. Sealed. The fairy must have blasted it with her weapon. Very astute. One less variable in the equation. It was exactly what he himself would have done.

Artemis did not waste any time attempting to force open the door. It was reinforced steel and he was twelve. You didn't have to be a genius to figure it out, even though he was. Instead the Fowl heir apparent crossed to the monitor wall and followed developments from there.

He knew immediately what the LEP were up to - send in the troll to secure a cry for help, interpret it as an invitation, and next thing you know a brigade of goblin stormtroopers were taking the manor. Clever. And unanticipated. It was the second time he'd underestimated his opponents. One way or another, there wouldn't be a third.

As the drama below unfolded on the monitors, Artemis's emotions jumped from terror to pride. Butler had done it. Defeated the troll, and without a single plea for aid passing his lips. Watching the display, Artemis appreciated fully, perhaps for the first time, the service provided by the Butler family.

Artemis activated the tri-band radio, broadcasting on revolving frequencies.

'Commander Root, you are monitoring all channels I presume ...'

For a few moments nothing but white noise emanated from the micro speakers, then Artemis heard the sharp click of a mike button.

'I hear you, human. What can I do for you?'

'Is that the commander?'

A noise filtered through the black gauze. It sounded like a whinny.

'No. This is not the commander. This is Foaly, the centaur. Is that the kidnapping lowlife human?'

It took Artemis a moment to process the fact that he'd been insulted.

'Mister ... ah ... Foaly. You have obviously not studied your psych texts. It is not wise to antagonize the hostage-taker. I may be unstable.'

'May be unstable? There's no may about it. Not that it matters. Soon you'll be no more than a cloud of radioactive molecules.'

Artemis chuckled. 'That's where you are mistaken, my quadrupedal friend. By the time that bio-bomb is detonated, I will be long gone from this time-stop.'

It was Foaly's turn to chuckle. 'You're bluffing, human. If there was a way to escape the field, I would have found it. I think you're talking through your -'

Thankfully it was at that moment Root took over at the microphone.

'Fowl? This is Commander Root. What do you want?'

'I would just like to inform you, Commander, that in spite of your attempted betrayal, I am still willing to negotiate.'

'That troll had nothing to do with me,' protested Root. 'It was done against my wishes.'

'The fact is that it was done, and by the LEP. Whatever trust we had is gone. So here is my ultimatum. You have thirty minutes to send in the gold, or else I will refuse to release Captain Short. Furthermore, I will not take her with me when I leave the time-field, leaving her to be disintegrated by the bio-bomb.'

'Don't be a fool, human. You're deluding yourself. Mud technology is aeons behind ours. There is no way to escape the time-field.'

Artemis leaned in close to the mike, smiling his wolfish smile.

'There's only one way to find out, Root. Are you willing to bet Captain Short's life on your hunch?'

Root's hesitation was highlighted by the hiss of interference. His reply, when it came, was tinged with just the right note of defeat.

'No,' he sighed. 'I'm not. You'll have your gold, Fowl. A tonne. Twenty-four carat.'

Artemis smirked. Quite the actor, our Commander Root.

'Thirty minutes, Commander. Count the seconds if your clock's stopped. I'm waiting. But not for long.'

Artemis terminated the contact, settling back in the swivel chair. It would seem as though the bait had been taken. No doubt the LEP analysts had discovered his 'accidental' invitation. The fairies would pay up because they believed the gold would be theirs again as soon as he was dead. Vaporized by the bio-bomb. Which, of course, he wouldn't be. In theory.

Butler put three rounds into the door frame. The door itself was steel and would have sent the Devastator slugs ricocheting straight back at him. But the frame was the original porous stone used to build the manor. It crumbled like chalk. A very basic security flaw, and one that would have to be remedied once this business was over.

Master Artemis was waiting calmly in his chair by the monitor bank.

'Nice work, Butler.'

'Thank you, Artemis. We were in trouble for a moment there. If it hadn't been for the captain ...'

Artemis nodded. 'Yes. I saw. Healing, one of the fairy arts. I wonder why she did it.'

'I wonder too,' said Butler softly. 'We certainly didn't deserve it.'

Artemis glanced up sharply. 'Keep the faith, old friend. The end is in sight.'

Butler nodded; he even attempted a smile. But though there were plenty of teeth in the grin, there was no heart.

'In less than an hour, Captain Short will be back with her people and we will have sufficient funds to relaunch some of our more tasteful enterprises.'

'I know. It's just ...'

Artemis didn't have to ask. He knew exactly what Butler was feeling. The fairy had saved both their lives and yet he insisted on holding her to ransom. To a man of honour like Butler, this was almost more than he could bear.

'The negotiations are over. One way or another she will be returned to her kind. No harm will befall Captain Short. You have my word.'

'And Juliet?'

'Yes?'

'Is there any danger to my sister?'

'No. No danger.'

'The fairies are just going to give us this gold and walk away?'

Artemis snorted gently. 'No, not exactly. They're going to bio-bomb Fowl Manor the second Captain Short is clear.'

Butler took a breath to speak, but hesitated. Obviously there was more to the plan. Master Fowl would tell him when he needed to know. So instead of quizzing his employer, he made a simple statement.

'I trust you, Artemis.'

'Yes,' replied the boy, the weight of that trust etched on his brow. 'I know.'

Gudgeon was doing what politicians did best: trying to duck responsibility.

'Your officer helped the humans,' he blurted, mustering as much indignation as possible. 'The entire operation was proceeding exactly as planned, until your female attacked our deputy.'

'Deputy?' chortled Foaly. 'Now the troll's a deputy.'

'Yes. He is. And that human made mincemeat of him. This entire situation could be wrapped up if it wasn't for your department's incompetence.'

Ordinarily, Root would have blown his top at this point, but he knew that Gudgeon was grasping at straws, desperately trying to save his career. So the commander just smiled.

'Hey, Foaly?'

'Yes, Commander?'

'Did we get the troll assault on disk?'

The centaur heaved a dramatic sigh. 'No, sir, we ran out of disks just before the troll went in.'

'What a pity.'

'A real shame.'

'Those disks could have been invaluable to Acting Commander Gudgeon at his hearing.'

Gudgeon's cool went out the window. 'Give me those disks, Julius! I know they're in there! This is blatant obstruction.'

'You're the only one guilty of obstruction around here, Gudgeon. Using this affair to further your own career.'

Gudgeon's face took on a hue to match Root's own. The situation was slipping away from him and he knew it. Even Chix Verbil and the other sprites were sidling out from behind their leader.

'I am still in charge here, Julius, so hand over those disks or I will have you detained.'

'Oh, really? You and whose army?'

For a second Gudgeon's face glowed with the old pomposity. It evaporated the moment he noticed the conspicuous lack of officers at his shoulders.

'That's right,' snickered Foaly. 'You ain't Acting Commander any more. The call came through from below. You've got an appointment with the Council, and I don't think it's to offer you a seat.'

It was probably Foaly's grin that drove Gudgeon over the edge.

'Give me those disks!' he roared, pinning Foaly to the operation's shuttle.

Root was tempted to let them wrestle for a while, but now wasn't the time to indulge himself.

'Naughty naughty,' he said, pointing his index finger at Gudgeon. 'No one beats Foaly but me.'

Foaly paled. 'Careful with that finger. You're still wearing the -'

Root's thumb accidentally brushed his knuckle, opening a tiny gas valve. The released gas propelled a tranquillized dart through the latex fingertip and straight into Gudgeon's neck. The Acting Commander, soon to be Private, sank like a stone.

Foaly rubbed his neck. 'Nice shot, Commander.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. Total accident. I forgot all about the fake finger. There are several precedents, I believe.'

'Oh, absolutely. Unfortunately Gudgeon will be unconscious for several hours. By the time he awakens, all the excitement will be over.'

'Shame.' Root allowed himself a fleeting grin, then it was back to business. 'Is the gold here?'

'Yep, they just inserted it.'

'Good.' He called to Gudgeon's sheepish troops. 'Get it loaded on a hover trolley and send it in. Any trouble and I'll feed you your wings. Understood?'

No one actually replied, but it was understood. No doubt about it.

'Good. Now hop to it.'

Root disappeared into the operation's shuttle, Foaly clapping behind him. The commander shut the door firmly.

'Is it armed?'

The centaur flicked a few important-looking switches on the main console.

'It is now.'

'I want it launched as soon as possible.' He glanced through the laser-proof refractor glass. 'We're down to minutes here. I see sunlight poking through.'

Foaly bent to his keyboard in earnest. 'The magic is breaking up. In fifteen minutes we're going to be in the middle of overground daytime. The neutrino streams are losing their integrity.'

'I see,' said Root, which was basically a lie again. 'OK, I don't see. But I do get the fifteen minutes bit. That gives you ten minutes to get Captain Short out of there. After that we're going to be sitting ducks for the entire human race.'

Foaly activated yet another camera. This one was linked to the hover trolley. He ran a finger experimentally across a trackpad. The trolley shot forward, almost decapitating Chix Verbil.

'Nice driving,' muttered Root. 'Will it get up the steps?'

Foaly didn't even look up from his computers.

'Automatic clearance compensator. One-point-five metre collar. No problems.'

Root speared him with a glare. 'You do that just to annoy me, don't you?'

Foaly shrugged his shoulders. 'I might do.'

'Yes, well, count yourself lucky my other fingers aren't loaded. Get my meaning?'

'Yessir.'

'Good. Now let's bring Captain Short home.'

Holly hovered beneath the portico. Orange shards of light striped the blue. The time-stop was breaking up. There were only minutes left before Root blue-rinsed the whole place. Foaly's voice buzzed in her earpiece.

'OK, Captain Short. The gold is on the way. Be ready to move.'

'We don't bargain with kidnapers,' said Holly, surprised. 'What's going on here?'

'Nothing,' replied Foaly casually. 'Straightforward exchange. The gold goes in, you come out. We send in the missile. Big blue bang, and it's all over.'

'Does Fowl know about the bio-bomb?'

'Yep. Knows all about it. Claims he can escape the time-field.'

'That's impossible.'

'Correct.'

'But they'll all be killed!'

'Big deal,' retorted Foaly, and Holly could almost see him shrug. 'That's what you get when you mess with the People.'

Holly was torn. There was no doubt that Fowl was a danger to the civilized underworld. Very few tears would be shed over his body. But the girl, Juliet, she was an innocent. She deserved a chance.

Holly descended to an altitude of two metres. Head height for Butler. The humans had congregated in the wreckage that used to be a hallway. There was disunity between them. The LEP officer could sense it.

Holly glared accusingly at Artemis. 'Have you told them?'

Artemis returned her stare. 'Told them what?'

'Yes, Fairy, told us what?' echoed Juliet belligerently, still a bit miffed over the mesmerizing.

'Don't play dumb, Fowl. You know what I'm talking about.'

Artemis never could play dumb for very long. 'Yes, Captain Short. I do. The bio-bomb. Your concern would be touching, if it extended to myself. Nevertheless, do not upset yourself. Everything is proceeding according to plan.'

'According to plan!' gasped Holly, pointing to the devastation surrounding them. 'Was this part of the plan? And Butler almost getting killed - all part of the plan?'

'No,' Artemis admitted. 'The troll was a slight blip. But irrelevant to the overall scheme.'

Holly resisted the urge to punch the pale human again, turning instead to Butler.

'Listen to reason, for heaven's sake. You cannot escape the time-field. It has never been done.'

Butler's features could have been etched in stone.

'If Artemis says it can be done, then it can.'

'But your sister. Are you willing to risk her life out of loyalty to a felon?'

'Artemis is no felon, miss, he is a genius. Now please remove yourself from my sightline. I am monitoring the main entrance.'

Holly buzzed up to six metres.

'You're crazy. All of you! In five minutes you'll all be dust. Don't you realize?'

Artemis sighed. 'You've had your answer, Captain. Now, please. This is a delicate stage in the proceedings.'

'Proceedings? It's a kidnapping! At least have the guts to call it what it is.'

Artemis's patience was beginning to fray.

'Butler, do we have any tranquilizer hypodermics left?'

The giant manservant nodded, but didn't speak. At that precise moment, if the order came to sedate, he wasn't sure if he would, or could. Luckily Artemis's attention was diverted by activity in the avenue.

'Ah, it would seem the LEP have capitulated. Butler supervise the delivery. But stay alert. Our fairy friends are not above trickery.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' muttered Holly.

Butler hurried to the demolished doorway, checking the load and catch on his Sig Sauer nine-millimetre. He was almost grateful for some military activity to distract him from his dilemma. In situations like these, training took over. There was no room for sentiment.

A fine haze of dust still hung in the air. Butler squinted through it, into the avenue beyond. The fairy filters rigged over his eyes revealed that there were no warm bodies approaching. There was, however, a large trolley seemingly driving itself up to the front door. It was floating on a cushion of shimmering air. Doubtless Master Artemis would have understood the physics of this machine, all Butler cared about was whether or not he could disable it.

The trolley bumped into the first step.

'Automatic compensator, my foot,' snorted Root.

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' replied Foaly. 'I'm working on it.'

'It's the ransom,' shouted Butler.

Artemis tried to quell the excitement rising in his chest. This was not the time to allow emotions to enter the equation.

'Check for booby traps.'

Butler stepped cautiously on to the porch. Shards of disintegrated gargoyle lay scattered beneath his feet.

'No hostiles. Seems to be self-propelled.'

The trolley lurched over the steps.

'I don't know who's driving this thing, but he could do with a few lessons.'

Butler bent low to the ground, scanning the trolley's underside.

'No explosive devices visible.'

He extracted a Sweeper from his pocket, extending the telescopic aerial.

'No bugs either. Nothing detectable at any rate. But what do we have here?'

'Uh oh,' said Foaly.

'It's a camera.'

Butler reached in, pulling the fish-eye lens out by the cable.

'Nighty-night, gentlemen.'

In spite of the load it carried, the trolley responded easily to Butler's touch, gliding across the threshold into the lobby. It stood there humming softly, as though waiting to be unloaded.

Now that the moment had come, Artemis was almost afraid to seize it. It was hard to believe that after all these months, his wicked scheme was minutes away from fruition. Of course these last few minutes were the vital ones, and the most dangerous.

'Open it,' he said at last, surprised at the tremble in his own voice.

It was an irresistible instant. Juliet approached tentatively, spangled eyes wide. Even Holly closed the throttle a notch, dropping until her feet brushed the marble tiling. Butler unzipped the black tarpaulin, dragging it back across the cargo. Nobody said a thing. Artemis imagined that somewhere the 1812 Overture was playing. The gold sat there, stacked in shining rows. It

seemed to have an aura, a warmth, but also an inherent danger. There were a lot of people willing to die or kill for the unimaginable wealth this gold could bring.

Holly was mesmerized. Fairies have an affinity for minerals, they are of the earth. But gold was their favourite. Its lustre. Its allure.

'They paid,' she breathed. 'I can't believe it.'

'Neither can I,' murmured Artemis. 'Butler, is it real?'

Butler hefted a bar from the stack. He dug the tip of a throwing knife into the ingot, gouging out a small sliver.

'It's real all right,' he said, holding the scraping up to the light. 'This one, at any rate.'

'Good. Very good. Begin unloading it, would you? We'll send the trolley back out with Captain Short.'

Hearing her name dispelled Holly's gold fever.

'Artemis, give it up. No human has ever succeeded in keeping fairy gold. And they've been trying for centuries. The LEP will do anything to protect their property.'

Artemis shook his head. Amused.

'I've told you ...'

Holly took him by the shoulders. 'You cannot escape! Don't you understand?'

The boy returned her gaze coolly.

'I can escape, Holly. Look in my eyes and tell me that I can't.'

So she did. Captain Holly Short gazed into her captor's blue-black eyes and she saw the truth in there. And for a moment she believed it.

'There's still time,' she said desperately. 'There must be something. I have magic.'

A crease of annoyance wrinkled the boy's brow.

'I hate to disappoint you, Captain, but there is absolutely nothing.'

Artemis paused, his gaze tugged momentarily upstairs to the converted loft. Perhaps, he thought. Do I really need all this gold? And was his conscience not pricking him, leeching the sweetness from his victory? He shook himself. Stick to the plan. Stick to the plan. No emotion.

Artemis felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

'Everything all right?'

'Yes, Butler. Keep unloading. Get Juliet to help. I need to talk to Captain Short.'

'Are you sure there's nothing wrong?'

Artemis sighed. 'No, old friend, I'm not sure. But it's too late now.'

Butler nodded, returning to his task. Juliet toddled along behind him like a terrier.

'Now, Captain. About your magic.'

'What about it?' Holly's eyes were hooded with suspicion.

'What would I have to do to buy a wish?'

Holly glanced at the trolley. 'Well, that depends. What do you have to bargain with?'

Root was not what you'd call relaxed. Increasingly wide bands of yellow light were poking through the blue. Minutes left. Minutes. His migraine was not helped by the pungent cigar feeding toxins into his system.

'Have all non-essential personnel been evacuated?'

'Unless they've sneaked back in since the last time you asked me.'

'Not now, Foaly. Believe me, now is not the time. Anything from Captain Short?'

'Nope. We lost video after the troll thing. I'd guess the battery is ruptured. We'd better get that helmet off her ASAP, or the radiation will fry her brain. That'd be a pity after all this work.'

Foaly returned to his console. A red light began pulsing gently.

'Wait, motion sensor. We've got activity by the main entrance.'

Root crossed to the screens. 'Can you enhance it?'

'No problem.' Foaly punched in the coordinates, blowing it up 400 per cent.

Root sat down on the nearest chair.

'Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?'

'You sure are.' Foaly chuckled. 'This is even better than the suit of armour.'

Holly was coming out. With the gold.

Retrieval were on her in half a second.

'Let's get you out of the danger zone, Captain,' urged a sprite, catching Holly by the elbow.

Another ran a rad-sensor over her helmet.

'We've got a power source breach here, Captain. We need to get your head sprayed immediately.'

Holly opened her mouth to protest, and had it instantly filled with rad-suppressant foam.

'Can't this wait?' she spluttered.

'Sorry, Captain. Time is of the essence. The commander wants a debriefing before we detonate.'

Holly was rushed towards the Mobile Ops unit, her feet barely touching the ground. All around her Retrieval Cleaners scanned the grounds for any trace of the siege. Techies dismantled the field dishes, making ready to pull the plug. Grunts steered the trolley towards the portal. It was imperative that everything be relocated to a safe distance before the bio-bomb went in.

Root was waiting on the steps.

'Holly,' he blurted. 'I mean Captain. You made it.'

'Yessir. Thank you, sir.'

'And the gold too. This is a real feather in your cap.'

'Well, not all, Commander. About half I think.'

Root nodded. 'No matter. We'll have the rest soon enough.'

Holly wiped rad-foam from her brow.

I've been thinking about that, sir. Fowl made another mistake. He never ordered me not to re-enter the house, and seeing as he brought me in there in the first place, the invitation still stands. I could go in and mind-wipe the occupants. We could hide the gold in the walls and do another time-stop tomorrow night ...'

'No, Captain.'

'But, sir ...'

Root's features regained whatever tension they'd lost.

'No, Captain. The Council is not about to hold off for some kidnapping Mud Man. It's just not going to happen. I have my orders, and believe me they're written in stone.'

Holly trailed Root into the mobile.

'But the girl, sir. She's an innocent!'

'Casualty of war. She threw her lot in with the wrong side. Nothing can be done for her now.'

Holly was incredulous. 'A casualty of war? How can you say that? A life is a life.'

Root spun sharply, grasping her by the shoulders.

'You did what you could, Holly,' he said. 'No one could have done more. You even retrieved most of the ransom. You're suffering from what humans call Stockholm Syndrome: you have bonded with your captors. Don't worry, it will pass. But those people in there, they know. About us. Nothing can save them now.'

Foaly looked up from his calculations.

'Not true. Technically. Welcome back, by the way.'

Holly couldn't spare even a second to return the greeting.

'What do you mean not true?'

'I'm fine, seeing as you asked.'

'Foaly!' shouted Root and Holly in unison.

'Well, like the Book says, "If the Mud Man gold can gather, In spite of magick or fairy glamour, Then that gold is his to keep, Until he lies in eternal sleep." So if he lives, he wins. It's that simple. Not even the Council will go against the Book.'

Root scratched his chin. 'Should I be worried?'

Foaly laughed mirthlessly. 'No. Those guys are as good as dead.'

'As good as isn't good enough.'

'Is that an order?'

'Affirmative, soldier.'

'I'm not a soldier,' said Foaly, and pressed the button.

Butler was more than a little surprised.

'You gave it back?'

Artemis nodded. 'About half. We still have quite a nest egg. About fifteen million dollars at today's market prices.'

Butler usually wouldn't ask. But this time he had to. 'Why, Artemis? Can you tell me?'

'I suppose so.' The boy smiled. 'I felt we owed the captain something. For services rendered.'

'Is that all?'

Artemis nodded. No need to talk about the wish. It could be perceived as weakness.

'Hmm,' said Butler, smarter than he looked.

'Now, we should celebrate,' enthused Artemis, deftly changing the subject. 'Some champagne, I think.'

The boy strode to the kitchen before Butler's gaze could dissect him.

By the time the others caught up, Artemis had already filled three glasses with Dom Perignon.

'I'm a minor, I know, but I'm sure Mother wouldn't mind. Just this once.'

Butler felt that something was afoot. Nevertheless, he took the crystal flute offered to him.

Juliet looked at her big brother.

'Is this OK?'

'I suppose so.' He took a breath. 'You know I love you, don't you, sis?'

Juliet scowled - something else that the local louts found very endearing. She smacked her brother on the shoulder.

'You're so emotional for a bodyguard.'

Butler looked his employer straight in the eye.

'You want us to drink this, don't you, Artemis?'

Artemis met his gaze squarely. 'Yes, Butler. I do.'

Without another word Butler drained his glass, Juliet followed suit. The manservant tasted the tranquillizer immediately, and although he would have had ample time to snap Artemis Fowl's neck, he didn't. No need for Juliet to be distressed in her final moments.

Artemis watched his friends sink to the floor. A pity to deceive them. But if they had been alerted to the plan, their anxiety could have counteracted the sedative. He gazed at the bubbles swirling in his own glass. Time for the most audacious step in his scheme. With only the barest hint of hesitation, he swallowed the tranquillizer-laced champagne.

Artemis waited calmly for the drug to take hold of his system. He didn't have to wait long, for each dose had been calculated according to body weight. As his thoughts began to swirl, it occurred to him that he might never awaken again. It's a bit late for doubts, he chided himself, and sank into unconsciousness.

'She's away,' said Foaly, leaning back from the console. 'It's out of my hands now.'

They followed the missile's progress through polarized windows. It really was a remarkable piece of equipment. Because its main weapon was light, the fallout could be focused to an exact radius. The radioactive element used in the core was solinium 2, which had a half-life of fourteen seconds. This effectively meant that Foaly could tune the bio-bomb to blue-rinse only Fowl Manor and not one blade of grass more, plus the building would be radiation-free

in under a minute. In the event that a few solinium flares refused to be focused, they would be contained by the time-field. Murder made easy.

'The flight path is pre-programmed,' explained Foaly, though no one was paying a blind bit of attention. 'She'll sail into the lobby and detonate. The casing and firing mechanism are plastic alloy and will completely disintegrate. Clean as a whistle.'

Root and Holly followed the bomb's arc. As predicted, it swooped through the decimated doorway without knocking so much as a sliver of stone from the medieval walls. Holly switched her attention to the missile's nose-cam. For a moment she caught a glimpse of the grand hallway where she had, until recently, been a prisoner. It was empty. Not a human in sight. Maybe, she thought. Just maybe. Then she looked at Foaly and the technology at his fingertips. And she realized that the humans were as good as dead.

The bio-bomb detonated. A blue orb of condensed light crackled and spread, filling every corner of the manor with its deadly rays. Flowers withered, insects shrivelled and fish died in their tanks. Not one cubic millimetre was spared. Artemis Fowl and his cohorts could not have escaped. It was impossible.

Holly sighed, turning away from the already dwindling blue-rinse. For all his grand designs, Artemis had been a mere mortal in the end. And for some reason she mourned his passing.

Root was more pragmatic. 'OK. Suit up. Full blackout gear.'

'It's perfectly safe,' said Foaly. 'Didn't you ever listen in school?'

The commander snorted. 'I trust science about as far as I could throw you, Foaly. Radiation has a habit of hanging around when certain scientists have assured us it has dissipated. No one steps outside the unit without blackout gear. So that counts you out, Foaly. Only bipedal suits. Anyway I want you on monitors, just in case ...'

In case of what? wondered Foaly, but he didn't comment. Save it for an I told you so later.

Root turned to Holly.

'Are you ready, Captain?'

Going back in. The idea of identifying three cadavers didn't appeal to Holly. But she knew it was her duty. She was the only one with first-hand knowledge of the interior.

'Yessir. On my way.'

Holly selected a blackout suit from the rack, pulling it on over her jumpsuit. As per training, she checked the gauge before tugging the vulcanized cowl. A dip in pressure would indicate a rip, which could prove fatal in the long term.

Root lined up the insertion team at the perimeter. The remains of Retrieval One were about as eager to insert themselves into the manor as they would be to juggle Atlantean stink balloons.

'You're certain the big one is gone?'

'Yes, Captain Kelp. He's gone, one way or another.'

Trouble wasn't convinced. 'Because that's one mean human. I think he has magic of his own.'

Corporal Grub giggled, and got an immediate clip on the ear for himself. He muttered something about telling Mummy and quickly strapped on his helmet.

Root felt his complexion redden. 'Let's move out. Your mission is to locate and recover the bullion. Watch for booby traps. I didn't trust Fowl when he was alive, and I definitely don't trust him now that he's dead.'

The phrase 'booby traps' got everyone's attention. The idea of a Bouncing Betty anti-personnel mine exploding at head height was enough to dispel any nonchalance in the troops. No one built weapons of cruelty like the Mud Men.

As the junior Recon officer, Holly was on point. And even though there weren't supposed to be any hostiles in the manor, she found her gun hand automatically straying to the Neutrino 2000.

The mansion was eerily quiet, with only the fizzle of the last few solinium flares to alleviate the stillness. Death was there too, in the silence. The manor was a cradle of death. Holly could smell it. Behind those medieval walls lay the bodies of a million insects, and under its floors the cooling corpses of spiders and mice.

They approached the doorway tentatively. Holly swept the area with an X-ray scanner. Nothing under the flagstones but dirt, and a nest of dead money-spiders.

'Clear,' she said into her microphone. 'I'm going in. Foaly, have you got your ears on?'

'I'm right there with you, darlin',' replied the centaur. 'Unless you step on a landmine, in which case I'm way back in the Operations Room.'

'Are you getting any thermals?'

'Not after a blue-rinse. We have residual heat signatures all over the place. Mostly solinium flares. It won't calm down for a couple of days.'

'But no radiation, right?'

'That's right.'

Root snorted in disbelief. Over the headsets it sounded like an elephant sneezing.

'It looks like we're going to have to sweep this house the old-fashioned way,' he grumbled.

'Make it quick,' advised Foaly. 'I give it five minutes tops before Fowl Manor rejoins the world at large.'

Holly stepped through what used to be the doorway. The chandelier swung gently from the concussive force of the missile's detonation, but otherwise everything was as she remembered it.

'The gold is downstairs. In my cell.'

Nobody answered. Not in words. Someone did manage a retch. Right into the microphone. Holly spun around. Trouble was doubled over, clutching his stomach.

'I don't feel so good,' he groaned. A tad unnecessarily, considering the pool of vomit all over his boots.

Corporal Grub took a breath, possibly to utter a sentence containing the word Mummy. What came out was a jet of concentrated bile. Unfortunately Grub didn't have the opportunity to open his visor before the illness struck. It was not a pretty sight.

'Ugh,' said Holly, pressing the corporal's visor-release button. A tsunami of regurgitated rations flooded over Grub's blackout suit.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' muttered Root, elbowing past the brothers. He didn't get very far. One step over the threshold and he was throwing up with the rest of them.

Holly pointed her helmet-cam at the stricken officers.

'What the hell is going on here, Foaly?'

'I'm searching. Hold on.'

Holly could hear computer keys being punched furiously.

'OK. Sudden vomiting. Spatial nausea ... Oh no.'

'What?' asked Holly. But she already knew. Maybe she always had.

'It's the magic,' blurted Foaly, words barely decipherable in his excitement. 'They can't enter the house until Fowl is dead. It's like an extreme allergic reaction. That means, unbelievable, that means ...'

'They made it,' completed Holly. 'He's alive. Artemis Fowl is alive.'

'D'Arvit,' groaned Root, and heaved another quart of vomit on to the terracotta tiles.

Holly went on alone. She had to see for herself. If Fowl's corpse was here, it would be with the gold, of that she was certain.

The same family portraits glared down at her, but now they seemed smug rather than austere. Holly was tempted to loose a few blasts into them from the Neutrino 2000. But that would be against the rules. If Artemis Fowl had beaten them, then that was it. There would be no recriminations.

She descended the stairway to her cell. The door was still swinging slightly from the bio-bomb concussion. A solinium flare ricocheted around the room like a trapped bolt of blue lightning. Holly stepped inside, half-afraid of what she might or might not see.

There was nothing. Nothing dead at any rate. Just gold. Two hundred ingots approximately. Piled on the mattress of her cot. Nice neat military rows. Good old Butler, the only human ever to take on a troll and win.

'Commander? Are you receiving? Over.'

'Affirmative, Captain. Body count?'

'Negative on the bodies, sir. I found the rest of the ransom.'

There was along silence.

'Leave it, Holly. You know the rules. We're pulling out.'

'But, sir. There must be a way ..."

Foaly broke in on the conversation. 'But nothing, Captain. I'm counting down the seconds until daylight here, and I don't like our odds if we have to exit at high noon.

Holly sighed. It made sense. The People could chose their exit time, as long as they left before the field disintegrated. It just galled her to think they'd been beaten by a human. An adolescent human at that.

She took a last look around the cell. A big ball of hatred had been born here, she realized, and it would have to be dealt with sooner or later. Holly jammed her pistol back into its holster. Preferably sooner. Fowl was the winner this time, but someone like him wouldn't be able to rest on his laurels. He would be back with some other moneymaking scheme. And when he arrived, he would find Holly Short waiting for him. Waiting with a big gun and a smile.

The ground was soft by the time-stop perimeter. Half a millennium's bad drainage from the medieval walls had transformed the foundations into a virtual bog. So that was where Mulch surfaced.

The soft ground wasn't the only reason for choosing that exact spot. The other reason was the smell. A good tunnel dwarf can pick up the scent of gold through half a kilometre of granite bedrock. Mulch Diggums had one of the best noses in the business.

The hover trolley floated virtually unguarded. Two of Retrieval's finest were stationed beside the recovered ransom, but at the moment they were having a little giggle at their stricken commander.

"E can't half chuck it, can't 'e, Chix?'

Chix nodded, mimicking Root's spewing technique.

Chix Verbil's pantomime antics provided the perfect cover for a spot of pilfering. Mulch gave his tubes a clearing before clambering from the tunnel. The last thing he needed was for a sudden burst of gas to alert the LEP to his presence. He needn't have worried. He could have slapped Chix Verbil in the face with a wet stink-worm and the sprite wouldn't have noticed.

In a matter of seconds, he had transferred two dozen ingots into the tunnel. It was the easiest job he had ever pulled. Mulch had to stifle a giggle as he dropped the last two bars down the hole. Julius had really done him a favour, getting him involved in this whole affair. Things couldn't have worked out much better. He was free as a bird, rich and, best of all, presumed dead. By the time the LEP realized that the gold was missing, Mulch Diggums would be half a continent away. If they realized at all.

The dwarf lowered himself into the ground. It would take several trips to move his treasure trove, but it would be worth the delay. With this kind of money, he could take early retirement. He would have to completely disappear of course, but a plan was already forming in his devious mind.

He would live above ground for a spell. Masquerade as a human dwarf, with an aversion to light. Perhaps buy a penthouse with thick blinds. In Manhattan perhaps, or Monte Carlo. It might seem odd, of course, a dwarf shutting himself away from the sun. But then again, he would be an obscenely rich dwarf. And humans will accept any story, however outlandish, when there's something in it for them. Preferably something green that folds.

Artemis could hear a voice calling his name. There was a face behind the voice, but it was blurred, hard to make out. His father perhaps?

'Father?' The word was strange in his mouth. Unused. Rusty. Artemis opened his eyes.

Butler was leaning over him.

'Artemis. You 're awake.'

'Ah, Butler. It's you.'

Artemis got to his feet, head spinning with the effort. He expected Butler's hand at his elbow to steady him. It didn't come. Juliet was lying on a chaise longue, dribbling on to the cushions. Obviously the draft hadn't worn off yet.

'It was just sleeping pills, Butler. Harmless.'

The manservant's eyes had a dangerous glint. 'Explain yourself.'

Artemis rubbed his eyes. 'Later, Butler. I'm feeling a bit-'

Butler stepped into his path. 'Artemis, my sister is lying drugged on that couch. She was almost killed. So explain yourself now!'

Artemis realized that he'd been given an order. He considered being offended, then decided that perhaps Butler was right. He had gone too far.

'I didn't tell you about the sleeping pills because you'd fight them. It's only natural. And it was imperative to the plan that we all go to sleep immediately.'

'The plan?'

Artemis lowered himself into a comfortable chair.

The time-field was the key to this whole affair. It's the LEP's ace in the hole. It's what has made them unbeatable for all these years. Any incident can be contained. That and the bio-bomb make a formidable combination.'

'So why did we have to be drugged?'

Artemis smiled. 'Look out of the window. Don't you see? They're gone. It's over.'

Butler glanced through the net curtains. The light was bright and clear. Not a hint of blue. Nevertheless, the manservant was unimpressed. 'They're gone for now. They'll be back tonight, I guarantee it.'

'No. That's against the rules. We beat them. That's it, game over.'

Butler raised an eyebrow. 'The sleeping pills, Artemis?'

'Not to be distracted, I see.'

Butler's answer was an implacable silence.

'The sleeping pills. Very well. I had to think of a way to escape the time-field. I trawled through the Book, but there was nothing. Not a clue. The People themselves have not yet developed a way. So I went back to their Old Testament, back to when their lives and ours were intertwined. You know the stories: elves that made shoes during the night, sprites that cleaned houses. Back when we coexisted to a certain extent. Magical favours in exchange for their fairy forts. The big one, of course, was Santa Claus.'

Butler's eyebrows nearly jumped off the front of his face.

'Santa Claus?'

Artemis raised his palms. 'I know, I know. I was a tad sceptical myself. But apparently our little corporate-image Santa Claus is not descended from a Turkish saint, he is a shadow of San D'Klass, the third king of the Frond Elfin dynasty. He is known as San the Deluded.'

'Not a great title, as titles go.'

'Admittedly. D'Klass thought that the greed of the Mud People in his kingdom could be assuaged by distributing lavish gifts. He would marshal all the great wizards once a year and have them throw up a great time-stop over vast regions. Flocks of sprites would be sent out to deliver the presents while the humans were asleep. Of course, it didn't work. Human greed can never be assuaged, especially not by gifts.'

Butler frowned. 'What if the humans ... we, that is ... What if we had woken up?'

'Ah yes. Excellent question. The heart of the matter. We wouldn't wake up. That is the nature of the time-stop. Whatever your state of consciousness going in, that's how you stay. You can neither wake up nor fall asleep. You must have noticed the fatigue in your bones these last few hours, yet your mind would not let you sleep.'

Butler nodded. Things were getting clearer, in a roundabout sort of way.

'So my theory was that the only way to escape the time-field was to simply fall asleep. Our own consciousness was all that kept us imprisoned.'

'You risked an awful lot on a theory, Artemis.'

'Not just a theory. We did have a test subject.'

'Who? Ah, Angeline.'

'Yes. My mother. Because of her narcotic-induced slumber, she moved with the natural order of time, unhindered by the time-field. If she had not, I would have simply surrendered to the LEP and submitted to their mind wipe.'

Butler snorted. He doubted it.

'So, because we could not fall asleep naturally, I simply administered us all a dose of Mother's pills. Simple.'

'You cut it pretty fine though. Another minute ...'

'Agreed.' The boy nodded. 'Things were tense there at the end. It was necessary in order to double-bluff the LEP.'

He paused so that Butler could process the information.

'Well, am I forgiven?'

Butler sighed. On the chaise lounge, Juliet snored like a drunken sailor. He smiled suddenly.

'Yes, Artemis. All is forgiven. Just one thing ...'

'Yes?'

'Never again. Fairies are too ... human.'

'You're right,' said Artemis, the crow's feet deepening around his eyes. 'Never again. We shall restrict ourselves to more tasteful ventures in the future. Legal, I can't promise.'

Butler nodded. It was close enough.

'Now, young Master, shouldn't we check on your mother?'

Artemis grew paler, if that were possible. Could the captain have reneged on her promise? She would certainly be entitled to.

'Yes. I suppose we should. Let Juliet rest. She's earned it.'

He cast his eyes upwards, along the stairs. It had been too much to hope for that he could trust the fairy. After all, he had held her captive against her will. He berated himself silently. Imagine parting with all those millions for the promise of a wish. Oh, the gullibility.

Then the loft door opened.

Butler drew his weapon instantly.

'Artemis, behind me. Intruders.'

The boy waved him away. 'No, Butler. I don't think so.'

His heart pounded in his ears, blood pulsed in his fingertips. Could it be? Could it possibly be? A figure appeared on the stairs. Wraith-like in a towelled robe, her hair wet from the shower.

'Arty?' she called. 'Arty, are you there?'

Artemis wanted to answer, he wanted to race up the grand stairway, arms outstretched. But he couldn't. His cerebral functions had deserted him.

Angeline Fowl descended, one hand resting lightly on the banister. Artemis had forgotten how graceful his mother was. Her bare feet skipped over the carpeted steps and soon she was standing before him.

'Morning, darling,' she said brightly, as though it were just another day.

'M-Mother,' stammered Artemis.

'Well, give me a hug.'

Artemis stepped into his mother's embrace. It was warm and strong. She was wearing perfume. He felt like the boy he was.

'I'm sorry, Arty,' she whispered into his ear.

'Sorry for what?'

'For everything. For the last few months, I haven't been myself. But things are going to change. Time to stop living in the past.'

Artemis felt a tear on his cheek. He wasn't sure whose tear it was.

'And I don't have a present for you.'

'A present?' said Artemis.

'Of course,' sang his mother, spinning him around. 'Don't you know what day it is?'

'Day?'

'It's Christmas Day, you silly boy. Christmas Day! Presents are traditional, are they not?'

Yes, thought Artemis. Traditional. San D'Klass.

'And look at this place. Drab as a mausoleum. Butler?'

The manservant hurriedly pocketed his Sig Sauer.

'Yes, ma'am?'

'Get on the phone to Brown Thomas. The platinum set number. Reopen my account. Tell Helene I want a Yuletide makeover. The works.'

'Yes, ma'am. The works.'

'Oh, and wake up Juliet. I want my things moved into the main bedroom. That attic is far too dusty.'

'Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am.'

Angeline Fowl linked her son's arm.

'Now, Arty, I want to know everything. First of all, what happened here?'

'Remodelling,' said Artemis. 'The old doorway was riddled with damp.'

Angeline frowned, completely unconvinced. 'I see. And how about school? Have you decided on a career?'

While his mouth answered these everyday questions, Artemis's mind was in turmoil. He was a boy again. His life was going to change utterly. His plans would have to be much more devious than usual if they were to escape his mother's attention. But it would be worth it.

Angeline Fowl was wrong. She had brought him a Christmas present.

EPILOGUE

Now that you have reviewed the case file, you must realize what a dangerous creature this Fowl is.

There is a tendency to romanticize Artemis. To attribute to him qualities that he does not possess. The fact that he used his wish to heal his mother is not a sign of affection. He did it simply because the Social Services were already investigating his case, and it was only a matter of time before he was put into care.

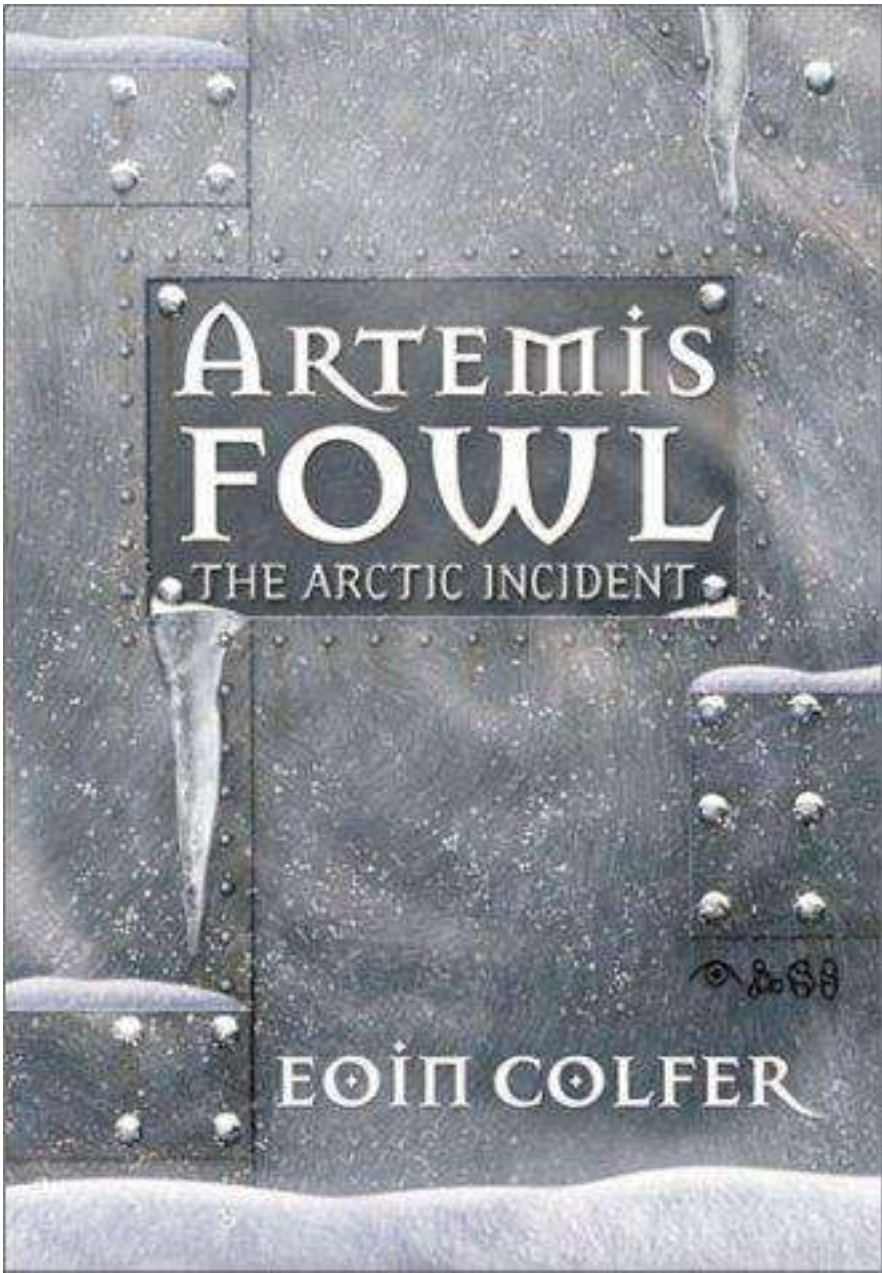
He kept the existence of the People quiet only so that he could continue to exploit them over the years, which he did on several occasions. His one mistake was leaving Captain Short alive. Holly became the LEP's foremost expert in the Artemis Fowl cases, and was invaluable in the fight against the People's most feared enemy. This fight was to continue across several decades.

Ironically, the greatest triumph for both, protagonists was the time they were forced to cooperate during the goblin insurgence. But that's another story.

Report compiled by: Doctor J. Argon, B.Psych, for the LEP Academy files.

Details are 94 per cent accurate, 6 per cent unavoidable extrapolation.

The End



ARTEMIS
FOWL
THE ARCTIC INCIDENT

Eoin Colfer

EOIN COLFER

Artemis Fowl:

A Psychological Assessment

Extract from The Teenage Years

By the age of thirteen, our subject, Artemis Fowl, was showing signs of an intellect greater than that of any human since Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Artemis had beaten European chess champion Evan Kashoggi in an on-line tournament, patented over twenty-seven inventions and won the architectural competition to design Dublin's new opera house. He had also written a computer program that diverted millions of dollars from Swiss bank accounts to his own, forged over a dozen Impressionist paintings and cheated the Fairy People out of a substantial amount of gold.

The question is, why? What drove Artemis to get involved in criminal enterprises? The answer lies with his father.

Artemis Fowl Senior was the head of a criminal empire that stretched from Dublin's docklands to the backstreets of Tokyo, but he had ambitions to establish himself as a legitimate businessman. He bought a cargo ship, stocked it with 250,000 cans of cola and set course for Murmansk, in northern Russia, where he had set up a business deal that could have proved profitable for decades to come.

Unfortunately, the Russian Mafiya decided they did not want an Irish tycoon cutting himself a slice of their market, and sank the Fowl Star in the Bay of Kola. Artemis Fowl the First was declared missing, presumed dead.

Artemis Junior was now the head of an empire with limited funds. In order to restore the family fortune, he embarked on a criminal career that would earn him over fifteen million pounds in two short years.

This vast fortune was mainly spent financing rescue expeditions to Russia. Artemis refused to believe that his father was dead, even though every passing day made it seem more likely.

Artemis avoided other teenagers and resented being sent to school, preferring to spend his time plotting his next crime.

So even though his involvement with the goblin uprising during his fourteenth year was to be traumatic, terrifying and dangerous, it was probably the best thing that could have happened. At least he spent some time outdoors and got to meet some new people.

It's a pity most of them were trying to kill him.

Report compiled by: Doctor J. Argon, B. Psych, for the LEP Academy files.

PROLOGUE

MURMANSK, NORTHERN RUSSIA, TWO YEARS AGO

THE two Russians huddled around a flaming barrel in a futile attempt to ward off the Arctic chill. The Bay of Kola was not a place you wanted to be after September, especially not Murmansk. In Murmansk even the polar bears wore scarves. Nowhere was colder, except perhaps Noril'sk.

The men were Mafiya enforcers and were more used to spending their evenings inside stolen BMWs. The larger of the two, Mikhael Vassikin, checked the fake Rolex beneath the sleeve of his fur coat.

'This thing could freeze up,' he said, tapping the diving bezel. 'What am I going to do with it then?'

'Stop your complaining,' said the one called Kamar. 'It's your fault we're stuck outside in the first place.'

Vassikin paused. 'Pardon me?'

'Our orders were simple: sink the *Fowl Star*. All you had to do was blow the cargo bay. It was a big enough ship, heaven knows. Blow the cargo bay and down she goes. But no, the great Vassikin hits the stern. Not even a back-up rocket to finish the job. So now we have to search for survivors.'

'She sank, didn't she?'

Kamar shrugged. 'So what? She sank slowly, plenty of time for the passengers to grab on to something. Vassikin, the famous sharpshooter! My grandmother could shoot better.'

Lyubkhin, the Mafiya's man on the docks, approached before the discussion could develop into an all-out brawl.

'How are things?' asked the bear-like Yakut.

Vassikin spat over the quay wall. 'How do you think? Did you find anything?'

'Dead fish and broken crates,' said the Yakut, offering both enforcers a steaming mug. 'Nothing alive. It's been over eight hours now. I have good men searching all the way down to Green Cape.'

Kamar drank deeply, then spat in disgust. 'What is this stuff? Pitch?'

Lyubkhin laughed. 'Hot cola. From the *Fowl Star*. It's coming ashore by the crate-load. Tonight we are truly on the Bay of Kola.'

'Be warned,' said Vassikin, spilling the liquid on to the snow. 'This weather is souring my temper. So no more terrible jokes. It's enough that I have to listen to Kamar.'

'Not for much longer,' muttered his partner. 'One more sweep and we call off the search. Nothing could survive these waters for eight hours.'

Vassikin held out his empty cup. 'Don't you have something stronger? A shot of vodka to ward off the cold? I know you always keep a flask hidden somewhere.'

Lyubkhin reached for his hip pocket, but stopped when the walkie-talkie on his belt began to emit static. Three short bursts.

'Three squawks. That's the signal.'

'The signal for what?'

Lyubkhin hurried down the docks, shouting back over his shoulder. 'Three squawks on the radio. It means that the K9 unit has found someone.'

The survivor was not Russian. That much was obvious from his clothes. Everything, from the designer suit to the leather overcoat, had obviously been purchased in Western Europe, perhaps even America. They were tailored to fit, and made from the highest-quality material.

Though the man's clothes were relatively intact, his body had not fared so well. His bare feet and hands were mottled with frostbite. One leg hung strangely limp below the knee, and his face was a horrific mask of burns.

The search crew had carried him from a ravine three clicks south of the harbour on a makeshift tarpaulin stretcher. The men crowded around their prize, stamping their feet against the cold that invaded their boots. Vassikin elbowed his way through the gathering, kneeling for a closer look.

'He'll lose the leg for sure,' he noted. 'A couple of fingers too. The face doesn't look too good either.'

'Thank you, Doctor Mikhael,' commented Kamar drily. 'Any ID?'

Vassikin conducted a quick thief's search. Wallet and watch.

'Nothing. That's odd. You'd think a rich man like this would have some personal effects, wouldn't you?'

Kamar nodded. 'Yes, I would.' He turned to the circle of men. 'Ten seconds, then there'll be trouble. Keep the currency, everything else I need returned.'

The sailors considered it. The man was not big. But he was Mafiya, the Russian organized-crime syndicate.

A leather wallet sailed over the crowd, skidding into a dip in the tarpaulin. Moments later it was joined by a Cartier chronograph. Gold with diamond studding. Worth five years of an average Russian's wages.

'Wise decision,' said Kamar, scooping up the treasure trove.

'Well?' asked Vassikin. 'Do we keep him?'

Kamar pulled a platinum Visa card from the kidskin wallet, checking the name.

'Oh we keep him,' he replied, activating his mobile phone. 'We keep him, and put some blankets over him. The way our luck's going, he'll catch pneumonia. And believe me, we don't want anything to happen to this man. He's our ticket to the big time.'

Kamar was getting excited. This was completely out of character for him.

Vassikin clambered to his feet. 'Who are you calling? Who is this guy?'

Kamar picked a number from his speed-dial menu. 'I'm calling Britva. Who do you think I'm calling?'

Vassikin paled. Calling the boss was dangerous. Britva was well known for shooting the bearers of bad news. 'It's good news, right? You're calling with good news?'

Kamar flipped the Visa at his partner. 'Read that.'

Vassikin studied the card for several moments. 'I don't read Angliskii. What does it say? What's the name?'

Kamar told him. A slow smile spread across Mikhael's face. 'Make the call,' he said.

CHAPTER 1: FAMILY TIES

THE loss of her husband had a profound effect on Angeline Fowl. She had retreated to her room, refusing to go outside. She took refuge in her mind, preferring dreams of the past to real life. It is doubtful whether she would have recovered had not her son, Artemis the Second, done a deal with the elf Holly Short: his mother's sanity in return for half the ransom gold he had stolen from the fairy police. His mother fully recovered, Artemis Junior focused his efforts on locating his father, investing large chunks of the family fortune in Russian excursions, local intelligence and Internet-search companies.

Young Artemis had received a double share of Fowl guile. However, with the recovery of his mother, a moral and beautiful lady, it became increasingly difficult for him to realize his ingenious schemes. Schemes that were ever more necessary to fund the search for his father.

Angeline, distraught by her son's obsession and afraid of the effects of the past two years on his mind, signed up her thirteen-year-old for treatment with the school counsellor.

You have to feel sorry for him. The counsellor, that is . . .

ST BARTLEBY'S SCHOOL FOR YOUNG GENTLEMEN, COUNTY WICKLOW IRELAND, PRESENT DAY

Doctor Po leaned back in his padded armchair, eyes flicking across the page in front of him.

'Now, Master Fowl, let's talk, shall we?'

Artemis sighed deeply, smoothing his dark hair back from a wide, pale brow. When would people learn that a mind such as his could not be dissected? He himself had read more psychology textbooks than the counsellor. He had even contributed an article to *The Psychologists' Journal* under the pseudonym Doctor F. Roy Dean Schlippe.

'Certainly, Doctor. Let's talk about your chair. Victorian?'

Po rubbed the leather arm fondly. 'Yes, quite correct. Something of a family heirloom. My grandfather acquired it at auction at Sotheby's. Apparently it once stood in the palace. The Queen's favourite.'

A taut smile stretched Artemis's lips perhaps a centimetre. 'Really, Doctor. They don't generally allow fakes in the palace.'

Po's grip stretched the worn leather. 'Fake? I assure you, Master Fowl, this is completely authentic.'

Artemis leaned in for a closer examination. 'It's clever, I grant you. But look here.' Po's gaze followed the youth's finger. 'Those furniture tacks. See the criss-cross pattern on the head? Machine tooled. Nineteen twenty at the earliest. Your grandfather was duped. But what matter? A chair is a chair. A possession of no importance, eh, Doctor?'

Po scribbled furiously, burying his dismay. 'Yes, Artemis, very clever. Just as your file says. Playing your little games. Now, shall we get back to you?'

Artemis Fowl the Second straightened the crease in his trousers.

'There is a problem here, Doctor.'

'Really? And what might that be?'

'The problem is that I know the textbook replies to any question you care to ask.'

Doctor Po jotted in his pad for a full minute. 'We do have a problem, Artemis. But that's not it,' he said eventually.

Artemis almost smiled. No doubt the doctor would treat him to another predictable theory. Which disorder would he have today? Multiple personality perhaps, or maybe he'd be a pathological liar?

'The problem is that you don't respect anyone enough to treat them as an equal.'

Artemis was thrown by the statement. This doctor was smarter than the rest. 'That's ridiculous. I hold several people in the highest esteem.'

Po did not glance up from his notebook. 'Really? Who, for example?'

Artemis thought for a moment. 'Albert Einstein. His theories were usually correct. And Archimedes, the Greek mathematician.'

'What about someone that you actually know?'

Artemis thought hard. No one came to mind.

'What? No examples?'

Artemis shrugged. 'You seem to have all the answers, Doctor Po. Why don't you tell me?'

Po opened a window on his laptop. 'Extraordinary. Every time I read this

'My biography, I presume?'

'Yes, it explains a lot.'

'Such as?' asked Artemis, interested in spite of himself.

Doctor Po printed off a page.

'Firstly there's your associate, Butler. A bodyguard, I understand. Hardly a suitable companion for an impressionable boy. Then there's your mother. A wonderful woman in my opinion, but with absolutely no control over your behaviour. Finally, there's your father. According to this, he wasn't much of a role model even when he was alive.'

The remark stung, but Artemis wasn't about to let the doctor realize how much. 'Your file is mistaken, Doctor,' he said. 'My father is alive. Missing perhaps, but alive.'

Po checked the sheet. 'Really? I was under the impression that he has been missing for almost two years. Why, the courts have declared him legally dead.'

Artemis's voice was devoid of emotion, though his heart was pounding. 'I don't care what the courts say, or the Red Cross. He is alive, and I will find him.'

Po scratched another note.

'But even if your father were to return, what then?' he asked. 'Will you follow in his footsteps? Will you be a criminal like him? Perhaps you already are?'

'My father is no criminal,' Artemis pointed out testily. 'He was moving all our assets into legitimate enterprises. The Murmansk venture was completely above board.'

'You're avoiding the question, Artemis,' said Po.

But Artemis had had enough of this line of questioning. Time to play a little game. 'Why, Doctor?' said Artemis, shocked. 'This is a sensitive area. For all you know, I could be suffering from depression.'

'I suppose you could,' said Po, sensing a breakthrough. 'Is that the case?'

Artemis dropped his face into his hands. 'It's my mother, Doctor.'

'Your mother?' prompted Po, trying to keep the excitement from his voice. Artemis had retired half a dozen counsellors from St Bartleby's already this year. Truth be told, Po was on the point of packing his own bags. But now . . .

'My mother, she . . .'

Po leaned forward on his fake Victorian chair. 'Your mother, yes?'

'She forces me to endure this ridiculous therapy when the school's so-called counsellors are little better than misguided do-gooders with degrees.'

Po sighed. 'Very well, Artemis. Have it your way, but you are never going to find peace if you continue to run away from your problems.'

Artemis was spared further analysis by the vibration of his mobile phone. It was on a coded secure line. Only one person had the number. The boy retrieved it from his pocket, flipping open the tiny communicator. 'Yes?'

Butler's voice came through the speaker. 'Artemis. It's me.'

'Obviously. I'm in the middle of something here.'

'We've had a message.'

'Yes. From where?'

'I don't know exactly. But it concerns the Fowl Star.'

A jolt flew along Artemis's spine. 'Where are you?'

'The main gate.'

'Good man. I'm on my way.'

Doctor Po whipped off his spectacles. 'This session is not over, young man. We made some progress today, even if you won't admit it. Leave now and I will be forced to inform the Dean.'

The warning was lost on Artemis. He was already somewhere else. A familiar electric buzz was crackling over his skin. This was the beginning of something. He could feel it.

CHAPTER 2: CRUSIN FOR CHIX

WEST BANK, HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS

THE traditional image of a leprechaun is one of a small, green-suited imp. Of course, this is the human image. Fairies have their own stereotypes. The People generally imagine officers of the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance squad to be truculent gnomes or bulked-up elves, recruited straight from their college crunchball squads.

Captain Holly Short fits neither of these descriptions. In fact, she would probably be the last person you would pick as a member of the LEPrecon squad. If you had to guess her occupation, the catlike stance and the sinewy muscles might suggest a gymnast or perhaps a professional potholer. But take a closer look, past the pretty face, into the eyes, and you will see determination so fiery it could light a candle at ten paces, and a streetwise intelligence that made her one of Recon's most respected officers.

Of course, technically, Holly was no longer attached to Recon. Ever since the Artemis Fowl Affair, when she had been captured and held to ransom, her position as Recon's first female officer had been under review. The only reason she wasn't at home watering her ferns right now was that Commander Root had threatened to turn in his own badge if Holly was suspended. Root knew, even if Internal Affairs wasn't convinced, that the kidnapping had not been Holly's fault, and only her quick thinking had prevented loss of life.

But the Council members weren't particularly interested in loss of human life. They were more concerned with loss of fairy gold. And according to them, Holly had cost them a fair chunk from the Recon ransom fund. Holly was quite prepared to fly above ground and wring Artemis Fowl's neck until he returned the gold, but that wasn't the way it worked: the Book, the fairy bible, stated that once a human managed to separate a fairy from his gold, then that gold was his to keep.

So, instead of confiscating her badge, Internal Affairs had insisted Holly handle grunt work -- somewhere that she couldn't do any harm. Stakeout was the obvious choice. Holly was farmed out to Customs and Excise, stuck in a Cham pod and suckered to the rock face overlooking a pressure-elevator chute. Dead-end duty.

That said, smuggling was a serious concern for the Lower Elements Police. It wasn't the contraband itself, which was generally harmless junk -- designer sunglasses, DVDs, cappuccino machines and such. It was the method of acquiring these items.

The B'wa Kell goblin triad had cornered the smuggling market and was becoming increasingly brazen in its overground excursions. It was even rumoured that the goblins had constructed their own cargo shuttle to make their expeditions more economically viable.

The main problem was that goblins were dim-witted creatures. All it would take was for one of them to forget to shield and goblin photos would be bouncing from satellites to news stations around the world. Then the Lower Elements, the last Mud-Man-free zone on the planet, would be discovered. When that happened, human nature being what it was, pollution, strip-mining and exploitation were sure to follow.

This meant that whichever poor souls were in the Department's bad books got to spend months at a time on surveillance duty, which is why Holly was now anchored to the rock face

outside a little-used chute's entrance.

E37 was a pressure elevator that emerged in downtown Paris, France. The European capital was red-flagged as a high-risk area, so visas were rarely approved. LEP business only. No civilian had been in the chute for decades, but it still merited twenty-four seven surveillance -- which meant six officers on eight-hour shifts.

Holly was saddled with Chix Verbil for a pod mate. Like most sprites, Chix believed himself God's green-skinned gift to females, and spent more time trying to impress Holly than doing his job.

'Lookin' good tonight, Captain,' was Chix's opening line that particular night. 'You do something with your hair?'

Holly adjusted the screen focus, wondering what you could do with an auburn crew cut.

'Concentrate, Private. We could be up to our necks in a firefight at any second.'

'I doubt it, Captain. This place is quiet as the grave. I love assignments like this. Nice 'n' easy. Just cruisin'.'

Holly surveyed the scene below. Verbil was right. The once thriving suburb had become a ghost town with the chute's closure to the public. Only the occasional foraging troll stumbled past their pod. When trolls began staking out territory in an area, you knew it was deserted.

'It's jus' you an' me, Cap. And the night's still young.'

'Stow it, Verbil. Keep your mind on the job. Or isn't private a low-enough rank for you?'

'Yes, Holly, sorry, I mean, yes, sir.'

Sprites. They were all the same. Give him a pair of wings and he thought he was irresistible.

Holly chewed her lip. They'd wasted enough taxpayers' gold on this stakeout. The brass should just call it a day, but they wouldn't. Surveillance duty was ideal for keeping embarrassing officers out of the public eye.

In spite of this, Holly was determined to do the job to the best of her ability. The Internal Affairs tribunal wasn't going to have any extra ammunition to throw at her if she could help it.

Holly called up their daily pod checklist on the plasma screen. The gauges for the pneumatic clamps were in the green. Plenty of gas to keep their pod hanging there for four long, boring weeks.

Next on the list was thermal imaging. 'Chix, I want you to do a fly-by. We'll run a thermal.'

Verbil grinned. Sprites loved to fly. 'Roger, Captain,' he said, strapping a thermoscan bar to his chest.

Holly opened a hole in the pod and Verbil swooped out, climbing quickly to the shadows. The bar on his chest bathed the area below with heat-sensitive rays. Holly punched up the thermoscan program on her computer. The view screen swam with fuzzy images in various shades of grey. Any living creature would show up, even behind a layer of solid rock. But there was nothing, just a few swear toads and the tail end of a troll shambling off the screen.

Verbil's voice crackled over the speaker. 'Hey, Captain. Should I take 'er in for a closer look?'

That was the trouble with portable scanners. The further away you were, the weaker the rays became.

'OK, Chix. One more sweep. Be careful.'

'Don't worry, Holly. The Chix man will keep himself in one piece for you.'

Holly drew a breath to make a threatening reply, but the retort died in her throat. On the

screen. Something was moving.

'Chix. You getting this?'

'Affirmative, Cap. I'm getting it, but I dunno what I'm getting.'

Holly enhanced a section of the screen. Two beings were moving around on the second level. The beings were grey.

'Chix. Hold your position. Continue scanning.'

Grey? How could grey things be moving? Grey was dead. No heat, cold as the grave.

Nevertheless . . .

'On your guard, Private Verbil. We have possible hostiles.'

Holly opened a channel to Police Plaza. Foaly, the LEP's technical wizard, would undoubtedly have their video feed running in the Operations' booth. 'Foaly. You watching?'

'Yep, Holly,' answered the centaur. 'Just bringing you up on the main screen.'

'What do you make of these shapes? Moving grey? I've never seen anything like it.'

'Me neither.' There followed a brief silence, punctuated by the clicking of a keyboard.

'Two possible explanations. One, equipment malfunction. These could be phantom images from another system. Like interference on a radio.'

'The other explanation?'

'It's so ludicrous that I hardly like to mention it.'

'Yeah, well do me a favour, Foaly, mention it.'

'Well, ridiculous as it sounds, someone may have found a way to beat my system.'

Holly paled. If Foaly was even admitting the possibility, then it was almost definitely true. She cut the centaur off, switching her attention back to Private Verbil. 'Chix! Get out of there. Pull up! Pull up!'

The sprite was far too busy trying to impress his pretty captain to realize the seriousness of his situation. 'Relax, Holly. I'm a sprite. Nobody can hit a sprite.'

That was when a projectile erupted through a chute window, blowing a fist-sized hole in Verbil's wing.

Holly tucked a Neutrino 2000 into its holster, issuing commands through her helmet's corn-set. 'Code Fourteen, repeat Code Fourteen. Fairy down. Fairy down. We are under fire. E37. Send warlock medics and back-up.'

Holly dropped through the hatch, rappelling to the tunnel floor. She ducked behind a statue of Frond, the first elfin king. Chix was lying on a mound of rubble across the avenue. It didn't look good. The side of his helmet had been bashed in by the jagged remains of a low wall, rendering his corn-system completely useless.

She needed to reach him soon or he was a goner. Sprites only had limited healing powers. They could magic away a wart, but gaping wounds were beyond them.

'I'm patching you through to the commander,' said Foaly's voice in her ear. 'Standby.'

Commander Root's gravelly tones barked across the airwaves. He did not sound in the best of moods. No surprises there.

'Captain Short. I want you to hold your position until back-up gets there.'

'Negative, Commander. Chix is hit. I have to reach him.'

'Holly. Captain Kelp is minutes away. Hold your position. Repeat. Hold your position.'

Behind the helmet's visor, Holly gritted her teeth in frustration. She was one step away from being booted out of the LEP, and now this. To rescue Chix she would have to disobey a direct order.

Root sensed her indecision. 'Holly, listen to me. Whatever they're shooting at you, it

punched straight through Verbil's wing. Your LEP vest is no good. So sit tight and wait for Captain Kelp.'

Captain Kelp. Possibly the LEP's most gung-ho officer, famous for choosing the name Trouble at his graduation ceremony. Still, there was no officer Holly would have preferred to have at her back going through a door.

'Sorry, sir, I can't wait. Chix took a hit in the wing. You know what that means.'

Shooting a sprite in the wing was not like shooting a bird. Wings were a sprite's largest organ and contained seven major arteries. A hole like that would have ruptured at least three.

Commander Root sighed. Over the speakers it sounded like a rush of static.

'OK, Holly. But stay low. I don't want to lose any of my people today.'

Holly drew her Neutrino 2000 from its holster, flicking the setting up to three. She wasn't taking any chances with the snipers. Presuming they were goblins from the B'wa Kell triad, on this setting the first shot would knock them unconscious for eight hours at the very least.

She gathered her legs beneath her and rocketed out from behind the statue. Immediately a hail of gunfire blew chunks from the structure.

Holly raced towards her fallen comrade, projectiles buzzing around her head like supersonic bees. Generally, in a situation of this kind, the last thing you do is move the victim, but with gunfire raining down on them, there was no choice. Holly grabbed the private by his epaulettes, hauling him behind a rusted-out delivery shuttle.

Chix had been out there a long time. He was grinning feebly. 'You came for me, Cap. I knew you would.'

Holly tried to keep the worry from her voice. 'Of course I came, Chix. Never leave a man behind.'

'I knew you couldn't resist me,' he breathed. 'I knew it.' Then he closed his eyes. There was a lot of damage done here. Maybe too much.

Holly concentrated on the wound. Heal, she thought, and the magic welled up inside her like a million pins and needles. It spread through her arms and ran down to her fingers. She placed her hands on Verbil's wound. Blue sparks tingled from her fingers into the hole. The sparks played around the wound, repairing the scorched tissue and replicating spilt blood. The sprite's breathing calmed, and a healthy green tinge started to return to his cheeks.

Holly sighed. Chix would be OK. He probably wouldn't fly any more missions on that wing, but he would live. Holly laid the unconscious sprite on his side, careful not to put pressure on the injured wing. Now for the mysterious grey shapes. Holly upped the setting on her weapon to four and ran without hesitation towards the chute entrance.

On your very first day in the LEP Academy, a big hairy gnome, with a chest the size of a bull troll, pins each cadet to a wall and warns them never to run into an unsecured building during a firefight. He says this in a most insistent fashion. He repeats it every day until the maxim is etched on every cadet's brain. Nevertheless, this was exactly what Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon Unit proceeded to do.

She blasted the terminal's double doors, diving through to the shelter of a check-in desk. Less than four hundred years ago, this building had been a hive of activity, with tourists queuing for above-ground visas. Paris had once been a very popular tourist destination. But inevitably, it seemed, humans had claimed the European capital for themselves. The only place fairies felt safe was in Disneyland, Paris, where no one looked twice at diminutive creatures, even if they were green.

Holly activated a motion-sensor filter in her helmet and scanned the building through the

desk's quartz security panel. If anything moved, the helmet's computer would automatically flag it with an orange corona. She looked up, just in time to see two figures loping along a viewing gallery towards the shuttle bay. They were goblins all right, reverting to all fours for extra speed, trailing a hover trolley behind them. They were wearing some kind of reflective foil suits, complete with headgear, obviously to fox the thermal sensors. Very clever. Too clever for goblins.

Holly ran parallel to the goblins, one floor down. All around her, ancient advertising hoardings sagged in their brackets. *TWO-WEEK SOLSTICE TOUR. TWENTY GOLD GRAMS. CHILDREN UNDER TEN TRAVEL FREE.*

She vaulted the turnstile gate, racing past the security zone and duty-free booths. The goblins were descending now, boots and gloves flapping on a frozen escalator. One lost his headgear in his haste. He was big for a goblin, over a metre. His lidless eyes rolled in panic, and his forked tongue flicked upwards to moisten his pupils.

Captain Short squeezed off a few bursts on the run. One clipped the backside of the nearest goblin. Holly groaned. Nowhere near a nerve centre. But it didn't have to be. There was a disadvantage to these foil suits. They conducted neutrino charges. The charge spread through the suit's material like fiery ripples across a pond. The goblin jumped a good two metres straight up, then tumbled, unconscious, to the foot of the escalator. The hover trolley spun out of control, crashing into a luggage carousel. Hundreds of small cylindrical objects spilled from a shattered crate.

Goblin Number Two fired a dozen rounds Holly's way. He missed, partly because his arms were jittery with nerves. But also because firing from the hip only works in the movies. Holly tried to take a screen shot of his weapon with her helmet camera for the computer to run a match on, but there was too much vibration.

The chase continued down the conduits and into the departure bay itself. Holly was surprised to hear the hum of docking computers. There wasn't supposed to be any power here. LEP Engineering would have dismantled the generators. Why would power be needed here?

She already knew the answer. Power would be needed to operate the shuttle monorail and Mission Control. Her suspicions were confirmed as she entered the hangar. The goblins had built a shuttle!

It was unbelievable. Goblins had barely enough electricity in their brains to power a ten-watt bulb. How could they possibly build a shuttle? Yet there it was, sitting in the dock like a used-craft seller's worst nightmare. There wasn't a bit of it less than a decade old, and the hull was a patchwork of weld spots and rivets.

Holly swallowed her amazement, concentrating on the pursuit. The goblin had paused to grab a set of wings from the cargo hold. She could have taken a shot then, but it was too risky. She wouldn't be surprised if the shuttle's nuclear battery was protected by nothing more than a single layer of lead.

The goblin took advantage of his reprieve to skip down the access tunnel. The monorail ran the length of the scorched rock to the massive chute. This chute was one of many of the natural vents that riddled the Earth's mantle and crust. Magma streams from the planet's molten core blasted up through these chutes towards the surface at irregular intervals. If it wasn't for these pressure releases, the Earth would have shaken itself to fragments aeons ago. The LEP had harnessed this natural power for express surface shots. Recon officers rode the magma flares in titanium eggs in times of emergency. For a more leisurely trip, shuttles avoided the flares, ascending the chutes on hot-air currents to the various terminals around the world.

Holly slowed her pace. There was nowhere for the goblin to go. Not unless he was going to fly into the chute itself, and nobody was that crazy. Anything that got caught up in a magma flare got fried right down to sub-atomic level.

The chute's entrance loomed ahead. Massive and ringed by charred rock.

Holly switched on the helmet's PA. 'That's far enough,' she shouted over the howl of core wind. 'Give it up. You're not going into the chute without science.'

Science was LEP-speak for technical information. In this case, science would be flare-prediction times. Accurate to within a tenth of a second. Generally.

The goblin raised a strange rifle, this time taking careful aim. The firing pin dropped, but whatever this weapon was firing, there wasn't any left.

'That's the problem with non-nuclear weapons, you run out of charge,' quipped Holly, fulfilling the age-old tradition of firefight banter, even though her knees were threatening to fold.

In response, the goblin hefted the rifle in Holly's direction. It was a terrible throw, landing five metres short. But it served its purpose as a distraction. The triad member used the moment to fire up his wings. They were old models -- rotary motor and a broken muffler. The roar of the engine filled the tunnel.

There was another roar, behind the wings. A roar that Holly knew well from a thousand logged flight hours in the chutes. There was a flare coming.

Holly's mind raced. If the goblins had somehow managed to hook up the terminal to a power source, then all the safety features would have been activated. Including . . .

Captain Short whirled, but the blast doors were already closing. The fireproof barriers were automatically triggered by a thermo sensor in the chute. When a flare passed by below, two-metre-thick steel doors shut off the access tunnel from the rest of the terminal. They were trapped in there, with a column of magma on the way. Not that the magma would kill them -- there wasn't much overspill from the flares. But the super-heated air would bake them drier than autumn leaves.

The goblin was standing on the tunnel's edge, oblivious to the impending eruption. Holly realized that it wasn't a question of the fugitive being crazy enough to fly into the chute. He was just plain stupid.

With a jaunty wave, the goblin hopped into the chute, rising rapidly from view. Not rapidly enough. A seven-metre-long jet of roiling lava pounced on him like a waiting snake, consuming him completely.

Holly did not waste time grieving. She had problems of her own. LEP jumpsuits had thermal coils to disperse excess heat, but that wouldn't be enough. In seconds, a wall of dry heat would roll in there, and raise the temperature enough to crack the walls.

Holly glanced up. A line of reinforced ancient coolant tanks were still bolted to the tunnel roof. She slid her blaster to maximum power and began sinking charges into the belly of the tanks. This was no time for subtlety.

The tanks buckled and split, belching out rancid air and a few trickles of coolant. Useless. They must have bled out over the centuries, and the goblins had never bothered replacing them. But there was one left, untouched. A black oblong, out of place among the standard green LEP models. Holly positioned herself directly underneath and fired.

Three thousand gallons of coolant-enhanced water crashed on to her head at the very moment a heatwave came billowing in from the chute. It was a curious sensation being burnt and frozen almost simultaneously. Holly felt blisters pop on her shoulders only to be flattened by water pressure. Captain Short was driven to her knees, lungs starving for air. But she couldn't

take a breath, not now, and she couldn't raise a hand to switch on her helmet tank.

After an eternity, the roaring stopped and Holly opened her eyes to a tunnel full of steam. She activated the demister in her visor and got up off her knees. Water slid in sheets from her non-friction suit. She released her helmet seals, taking deep breaths of tunnel air. Still warm, but breathable.

Behind her, the blast doors slid open and Captain Trouble Kelp appeared in the gap, along with an LEP rapid-response team.

'Nice manoeuvre, Captain.'

Holly didn't answer, too absorbed by the weapon abandoned by the recently vaporized goblin. This was the prize pig of rifles, almost half a metre long, with a starlite scope clipped above the barrel.

Holly's first thought had been that somehow the B'wa Kell was manufacturing its own weapons. But now she realized that the truth was far more dangerous. Captain Short pried the rifle from the half-melted rock. She recognized it from her History of Law Enforcement in service. An old Softnose laser. Softnoses had been outlawed long ago. But that wasn't the worst of it. Instead of a fairy power source, the gun was powered by a human AAA alkaline battery.

'Trouble,' she called. 'Have a look at this.'

'D'Arvit,' breathed Kelp, reaching immediately for the radio controls on his helmet. 'Get me a priority channel to Commander Root. We have Class A contraband. Yes, Class A. I need a full team of techies. Get Foaly too. I want this entire quadrant shut down . . .'

Trouble continued spouting orders, but they faded to a distant buzz in Holly's ears. The B'wa Kell was trading with the Mud People. Humans and goblins working together to reactivate outlawed weapons. And if the weapons were here, how long could it be before the Mud People followed?

Help arrived just after the nick of time. In thirty minutes there were so many halogen spotlights buzzing around E37 that it looked like a GolemWorld movie premiere.

Foaly was down on his knees examining the unconscious goblin by the escalator. The centaur was the main reason that humans hadn't yet discovered the People's underground lairs. A technical genius, who had pioneered every major development from flare prediction to mind-wiping technology, every discovery made him less respectful and more annoying. But rumour had it that he had a soft spot for a certain female Recon officer. Actually, the only female Recon officer.

'Good job, Holly,' he said, rubbing the goblin's reflective suit. 'You just had a firefight with a kebab.'

'That's it, Foaly, draw attention away from the fact that the B'wa Kell foxed your sensors.'

Foaly tried on one of the helmets. 'Not the B'wa Kell. No way. Too dumb. Goblins just don't have the cranial capacity. These are human manufacture.'

Holly snorted. 'And how do you know that? Recognize the stitching?'

'Nope,' replied Foaly, tossing the helmet to Holly.

Holly read the label. 'Made in Germany.'

'I'd guess that this is a fire suit. The material keeps the heat out as well as in. This is serious, Holly. We're not talking a couple of designer shirts and a case of chocolate bars here. Some human is doing some serious smuggling with the B'wa Kell.'

Foaly stepped out of the way to allow the technical crew access to their prisoner. The techies would tag the unconscious goblin with a subcutaneous sleeper. The sleeper contained microcapsules of a sedative agent and a tiny detonator. Once tagged, a criminal could be

knocked out by computer if the LEP realized he was involved in an illegal situation.

'You know who's probably behind this, don't you?' said Holly.

Foaly rolled his eyes. 'Oh, let me guess. Captain Short's arch-enemy, Master Artemis Fowl.'

'Well, who else could it be?'

'Take your pick. The People have been in contact with thousands of Mud Men over the years.'

'Is that so?' retorted Holly. 'And how many that haven't been mind-wiped?'

Foaly pretended to think about it, adjusting the foil hat jammed on his head to deflect any brain-probing signals that could be focused his way. 'Three,' he muttered eventually.

'Pardon?'

'Three, OK?'

'Exactly. Fowl and his pet gorillas. Artemis is behind this. Mark my words.'

'You'd just love that to be the case now, wouldn't you? You'd finally have the chance to get your own back. You do remember what happened the last time the LEP went up against Artemis Fowl?'

'I remember. But that was last time.'

Foaly smirked. 'I would remind you that he'll be thirteen now.'

Holly's hand dropped to her buzz baton. 'I don't care how old he is. One zap with this and he'll be sleeping like a baby.'

Foaly nodded towards the entrance. 'I'd save my charges if I were you. You're going to need them.'

Holly followed his gaze. Commander Julius Root was sweeping across the secured zone. The more he saw, the redder his face grew, hence the nickname, Beetroot.

'Commander,' began Holly. 'You need to see this.'

Root's gaze silenced her. 'What were you thinking?'

'Pardon me, sir?'

'Don't give me that. I was in Ops for the whole thing. I was watching the video feed from your helmet.'

'Oh.'

'Oh hardly covers it, Captain!' Root's buzz-cut grey hair was quivering with emotion. 'This was supposed to be a surveillance mission. There were several back-up squads sitting on their well-trained behinds only waiting for you to call. But no, Captain Short decides to take on the B'wa Kell on her own.'

'I had a man down, sir. There was no choice.'

'What was Verbil doing out there anyway?'

For the first time, Holly's gaze dropped. 'I sent him out to do a thermal, sir. Just following regulations.'

Root nodded. 'I've talked to the paramedic warlock. Verbil will be OK, but his flying days are over. There'll be a tribunal, of course.'

'Yes, sir. Understood.'

'A formality, I'm sure, but you know the Council.'

Holly knew the Council all too well. She would be the first LEP officer in history to be the subject of two simultaneous investigations.

'So what's this I hear about a Class A?'

All contraband was classed. Class A was code for dangerous human technology. Power

sources, for instance.

'This way, sir.'

Holly led them to the rear of the maintenance area, to the shuttle bay itself, where a restricted-access perspex dome had been erected. She pressed through the frosted flaps.

'You see. This is serious.'

Root studied the evidence. In the shuttle's cargo bay were crates of AAA batteries. Holly selected a pack.

'Pencil batteries,' she said. 'A common human power source. Crude, inefficient and an environmental disaster. Twelve crates of them right here. Who knows how many are in the tunnels already.'

Root was unimpressed. 'Forgive me for not quaking in my boots. So a few goblins get to play human video games. So what?'

Foaly had spotted the goblin's Softnose laser. 'Oh no!' he said, checking the weapon.

'Exactly,' agreed Holly.

The commander did not appreciate being left out of the conversation.

'Oh no? I hope you're being melodramatic.'

'No, chief,' replied the centaur, sombre for once. 'This is deadly serious. The B'wa Kell is using human batteries to power the old Softnose lasers. They'd only get about six shots per battery. But you give every goblin a pocketful of power cells, and that's a lot of shots.'

'Softnose lasers? They were outlawed decades ago. Weren't they all recycled?'

Foaly nodded. 'Supposedly. My division supervised the meltdowns. Not that we considered it priority. They were originally powered by a single solar cell, with a life of less than a decade. Obviously somebody managed to sneak a few out of the recycling lock-up.'

'Quite a few by the look of all these batteries. That's the last thing I need, goblins with Softnoses.'

The theory behind the Softnose technique involved placing an inhibitor on the blaster, which allowed the laser to travel at slower speeds so that it actually penetrated the target. Initially developed for mining purposes, they were quickly adapted by some greedy weapons manufacturer.

The Softnoses were just as quickly outlawed, for the obvious reason that these weapons were designed to kill and not incapacitate. Now and then one found its way into the hands of a gang member. But this did not look like small-scale, black-market trading. This looked like somebody was planning something big.

'You know what the worrying thing about this is?' said Foaly.

'No,' said Root, with deceptive calmness. 'Do tell me what the worrying thing is.'

Foaly turned the gun around. 'The way this weapon has been adapted to take a human battery. Very clever. There's no way a goblin figured this out on his own.'

'But why adapt the Softnoses?' asked the commander. 'Why not just use the old solar cells?'

'Those solar cells are very rare. They're worth their weight in gold. Antique dealers use them to power all sorts of old gadgets. And it would be impossible to build a power-cell factory of any kind without my sensors picking up emissions. Much simpler just to steal them from the humans.'

Root lit one of his trademark fungal cigars. 'Tell me that's it. Tell me there's nothing else.'

Holly's gaze flickered to the rear of the hangar. Root caught the glance and pressed past the crates to the makeshift shuttle in the docking bay. The commander climbed into the craft.

'And what the hell is this, Foaly?'

The centaur ran a hand along the ship's hull. 'It's amazing. Unbelievable. They put a shuttle together from junk. I'm surprised this thing gets off the ground.'

The commander bit down hard on his fungus cigar. 'When you're finished admiring the goblins, Foaly, maybe you can explain how the B'wa Kell got a hold of this stuff. I thought all outdated shuttle technology was supposed to be destroyed.'

'That's what I thought. I retired some of this stuff myself. This starboard booster used to be in EI, until Captain Short blew it out last year. I remember signing the destruct order.'

Root spared a second to shoot Holly a withering glance.

'So now we have shuttle parts escaping the recycling smelters as well as Softnose lasers. Find out how this shuttle got here. Take it apart, piece by piece. I want every strand of wire lasered for prints and DNA. Feed all the serial numbers into the mainframe. See if there are any common denominators.'

Foaly nodded. 'Good idea. I'll get someone on it.'

'No, Foaly. You get on it. This is priority. So give your conspiracy theories a rest for a few days and find me the inside fairy who's selling this junk.'

'But, Julius,' protested Foaly. 'That's grunt work.'

Root took a step closer. 'One, don't call me Julius, civilian. And two, I'd say it was more like donkey work.'

Foaly noticed the vein pulsing in the commander's temple. 'Point taken,' he said, removing a handheld computer from his belt. 'I'll get right on it.'

'You do that. Now, Captain Short, what is our B'wa Kell prisoner saying?'

Holly shrugged. 'Nothing much, still unconscious. He'll be coughing soot for a month when he wakes up. Anyway, you know how the B'wa Kell works. The soldiers aren't told anything. This guy is just a grunt. It's a pity the Book forbids using the mesmer on other fairies.'

'Hmm,' said Root, his face glowing as red as a baboon's behind. 'An even greater pity the Atlantis Convention outlawed truth drugs. Otherwise we could pump this convict full of serum until he sang like a drunken Mud Man.' The commander took several deep breaths, calming down before his heart popped. 'Right now, we need to find out where these batteries came from, and if there are any more in the Lower Elements.'

Holly took a breath. 'I have a theory, sir.'

'Don't tell me,' groaned Root. 'Artemis Fowl, right?'

'Who else could it be? I knew he'd be back. I knew it.'

'You know the rules, Holly. He beat us last year. Game over. That's what the Book says.'

'Yes, sir, but that was a different game. New game, new rules. If Fowl is supplying power cells to the B'wa Kell, the least we can do is check it out.'

Root considered it. If Fowl was behind this, things could get very complicated, very fast.

'I don't like the idea of interrogating Fowl on his turf. But we can't bring him down here. The pressure below ground would kill him.'

Holly disagreed. 'Not if we keep him in a secure environment. The city is equalized. So are the shuttles.'

'OK, go,' the commander said at last. 'Bring him in for a little chat. Bring the big one too.'

'Butler?'

'Yes, Butler.' Root paused. 'But remember, we're going to run a few scans, Holly, that's it. I don't want you using this as an opportunity to settle a score.'

'No, sir. Strictly business.'

'Do I have your word on that?'

'Yes, sir. I guarantee it.'

Root ground the cigar butt beneath his heel. 'I don't want anyone else getting hurt today, not even Artemis Fowl.'

'Understood.'

'Well,' added the commander, 'not unless it's absolutely necessary.'

CHAPTER 3: GOING UNDERGROUND

ST BARTLEBY'S SCHOOL FOR YOUNG GENTLEMEN

BUTLER had been in Artemis Fowl's service since the moment of the boy's birth. He had spent the first night of his charge's life standing guard on the Sisters of Mercy maternity ward. For over a decade, Butler had been teacher, mentor and protector to the young heir. The pair had never been separated for more than a week, until now. It shouldn't bother him, he knew that. A bodyguard should never become emotionally attached to his package. It affects his judgement. But in his private moments, Butler couldn't help thinking of the Fowl heir as the son or younger brother he'd never had.

Butler parked the Bentley Arnage Red Label on the college avenue. If anything, the Eurasian manservant had bulked up since mid-term. With Artemis in boarding school, he was spending a lot more time in the gym. Truth be told, Butler was bored pumping iron, but the college authorities absolutely refused to allow him a bunk in Artemis's room. And when the gardener had discovered the bodyguard's hideout just off the seventeenth green, they had banned him from the college grounds altogether.

Artemis slipped through the college gate, Doctor Po's comments still in his thoughts.

'Problems, sir?' said Butler, noticing his employer's sour expression.

Artemis ducked into the Bentley's wine-leather interior, selecting a still water from the bar. 'Hardly, Butler. Just another quack spouting psychobabble.'

Butler kept his voice level. 'Should I have a word with him?'

'Never mind him now. What news of the *Fowl Star*?'

'We got an e-mail at the manor this morning. It's an mpeg;

Artemis scowled. He could not access MPEG video files on his mobile phone.

Butler pulled a portable computer from the glove compartment. 'I thought you might be anxious to see the file, so I downloaded it on to this.'

He passed the computer over his shoulder. Artemis activated the compact machine, folding out the flat colour screen. At first he thought the battery was dead, then realized he was looking at a field of snow. White on white, with only the faintest shadows to indicate dips and drumlins.

Artemis felt the uneasiness rolling in his gut. Funny how such an innocent image could be so foreboding.

The camera panned upwards, revealing a dull twilight sky. Then a black hunched object in the distance. A rhythmic crunching issued through the compact speakers as the cameraman advanced through the snow. The object grew clearer. It was a man sitting on, no, tied to, a chair. The ice clinked in Artemis's glass. His hands were shaking.

The man was dressed in the rags of a once fine suit. Scars branded the prisoner's face like lightning bolts, and one leg appeared to be missing. It was difficult to tell. Artemis's breath was jumpy now, like a marathon runner's.

There was a sign around the man's neck. Cardboard and twine. On the sign was scrawled in thick black letters: *Zdmvstvutye, syn*. The camera zoomed in on the message for several seconds, then went blank.

'Is that all?' .

Butler nodded. 'Just the man and the sign. That's it.'

'*Zdmvstvutye, syn,*' muttered Artemis, his accent flawless. Since his father's disappearance he had been teaching himself the language.

'Should I translate for you?' asked Butler, also a Russian speaker. He had picked it up during a five-year stint with an espionage unit in the late eighties. His accent, however, was not quite so sophisticated as his young employer's.

'No, I know what it means,' replied Artemis. '*Zdmvstvutye, syn:* Hello, son.'

Butler pulled the Bentley on to the dual carriageway. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Eventually Butler had to ask.

'Do you think it's him, Artemis? Could that man be your father?'

Artemis rewound the MPEG, freezing it on the mysterious man's face. He touched the display, sending rainbow distortions across the screen.

'I think so, Butler. But the picture quality is too poor. I can't be certain.'

Butler understood the emotions battering his young charge. He too had lost someone aboard the Fowl Star. His uncle, the Major, had been assigned to Artemis's father on that fateful trip. Unfortunately, the Major's body had turned up in the Tchersky morgue.

Artemis regained his composure. 'I must pursue this, Butler.'

'You know what's coming next, of course?'

'Yes. A ransom demand. This is merely the teaser, to get my attention. I need to cash in some of the People's gold. Contact Lars in Zurich immediately.'

Butler accelerated into the fast lane.

'Master Artemis, I have had some experience in these matters.'

Artemis did not interrupt. Butler's career before his current charge's birth had been varied to say the least.

'The pattern with kidnappers is to eliminate all witnesses. Then they will generally try to eliminate each other to avoid splitting the ransom.'

'Your point being?'

'My point being that paying a ransom in no way guarantees your father's safety. If indeed that man is your father. It is quite possible that the kidnappers will take your money and then kill all of us.'

Artemis studied the screen. 'You're right, of course. I will have to devise a plan.'

Butler swallowed. He remembered the last plan. It had almost got them both killed, and could have plunged the planet into a cross-species war. Butler was a man who didn't scare easily, but the spark in Artemis Fowl's eyes was enough to send a shiver crackling down his spine.

CHUTE TERMINAL EI: TARA, IRELAND

Captain Holly Short had decided to work a double shift and proceed directly to the surface. She paused only for a nutri-bar and energy shake before hopping on the first shuttle to the terminal at Tara.

One of Tara's officials was not making her journey any easier. The head of security was annoyed that Captain Short had not only put all chute traffic on hold to take a priority pod from EI, but had then proceeded to commandeer an entire shuttle for the return journey.

'Why don't you check your system again?' said Holly, through gritted teeth. 'I'm sure the authorization from Police Plaza has arrived by now.'

The truculent gnome consulted his hand-held computer. 'No, ma'am. I ain't got nuthin.'

'Look, Mister . . .'

'Commandant Terryl.'

'Commandant Terryl. I'm on an important mission here. National security. I need you to keep the arrivals hall completely clear for the next couple of hours.'

Terryl made a great show of almost collapsing. 'The next coupl'a hours! Are you crazy, girly? I got three shuttles comin' in from Atlantis. What'm I s'posed to tell 'em? Tour's off 'cause of some LEP secret shenanigans. This is high season. I can't just shut things down. No way, no how.'

Holly shrugged. 'Fine. You just let all your tourists catch sight of the two humans I'm bringing down here. There'll be a riot. I guarantee it.'

'Two humans?' said the head of security. 'Inside the terminal? Are you nuts?'

Holly was running out of patience, and time. 'Do you see this?' she demanded, pointing to the insignia on her helmet. 'I'm LEP. A captain. No rent-a-cop gnome is going to stand in the way of my orders.'

Terryl drew himself up to his full height, which was about seventy centimetres. 'Yeah, I heard a you. The crazy girly captain. Caused quite a stir up here last year, didn't you? My tax ingots gonna be payin' for that little screw-up for quite some time.'

'Just ask Central, you bureaucratic idiot.'

'Call me what you want, missy. We have our rules here, and without confirmation from below, ain't nuthin I can do to change 'em. 'Specially not fer some gun-totin' girly with an attitude problem.'

'Well get on the blower to Police Plaza then!'

Terryl sniffed. 'The magma flares have just started actin' up. It's hard to get a line. Maybe I'll try again, after my rounds. Just you take yourself a seat in the departure lounge.'

Holly's hand strayed towards her buzz baton.

'You know what you're doing, don't you?'

'What?' croaked the gnome.

'You're obstructing an LEP operation.'

'I ain't obstructin' nuthin

'And, as such, it is in my power to remove said obstruction using any force that I deem necessary.'

'Don't you threaten me, missy.'

Holly drew the baton, twirling it expertly. 'I'm not threatening you. I'm just informing you of police procedure. If you continue to obstruct me, I remove the obstruction, in this case you, and proceed to the next in command.'

Terryl was unconvinced. 'You wouldn't dare.'

Holly grinned. 'I'm the crazy girly captain. Remember?'

The gnome considered it. It was unlikely the officer would buzz him, but then again who knew with female elves?

'OK,' he said, printing off a sheet on the computer. 'This is a twenty-four-hour visa. But if you're not back here in that time, I'll have you taken into custody on your return. Then I'll be the one making the threats.'

Holly snatched the sheet. 'Whatever. Now, remember, make sure Arrivals is clear when I get back.'

IRELAND, EN ROUTE FROM ST BARTLEBY'S TO FOWL MANOR

Artemis was bouncing ideas off Butler. It was a technique he often used when trying to come up with a plan. After all, if anybody was an expert on covert operations, it was his bodyguard.

'We can't trace the MPEG?'

'No, Artemis. I tried. They put a decay virus in with the e-mail. I only just managed to get the film on disk before the original disintegrated.'

'What about the MPEG itself? Could we get a geographical fix from the stars?'

Butler smiled. Young Master Artemis was starting to think like a soldier.

'No luck. I sent a shot to a friend of mine in NASA. He didn't even bother putting it into the computer. Not enough definition.'

Artemis was silent for a minute.

'How fast can we get to Russia?'

Butler drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. 'It depends.'

'Depends on what?'

'On how we go, legal or illegal.'

'Which is quicker?'

Butler laughed. Something you didn't hear very often. 'Illegal is usually faster. Either way is going to be pretty slow. We can't go by air, that's for sure. The Mafiya are going to have foot soldiers at every airstrip.'

'Are we sure it's the Mafiya?'

Butler glanced in the rear-view mirror. 'I'm afraid so. All kidnappings go through the Mafiya. Even if an ordinary criminal managed to abduct your father, he would have to hand him over once the Mafiya had found out about it.'

Artemis nodded. 'That's what I thought. So we will have to travel by sea, and that will take a week at the very least. We could really use some help with transport.'

Something the Mafiya won't expect. How's our ID situation?'

'No problem. I thought we'd go native. We'll arouse less suspicion. I have passports and visas.'

'Da. What is our cover?'

'What about Stefan Bashkir and his Uncle Constantin?'

'Perfect. The chess prodigy and his chaperone.' They had used this cover many times before on previous search missions. Once, a checkpoint official, himself a chess grandmaster, had doubted their story until Artemis beat him in six moves. The technique had since become known as the Bashkir Manoeuvre.

'How soon can we leave?'

'Almost immediately. Missus Fowl and Juliet are in Nice this week. That gives us eight days. We can mail the school, make up some excuse.'

'I dare say St Bartleby's will be glad to be rid of me for a while.'

'We could go straight to the airport from Fowl Manor. The Lear jet is stocked. At least we can fly as far as Scandinavia and we can try to pick up a boat from there. I just have to pick up a few things at the manor first.'

Artemis could imagine exactly the kind of things his manservant wished to pick up. Sharp things and explosive things.

'Good. The sooner the better. We've got to find these people before they know we're looking. We can monitor e-mail as we go.'

Butler took the exit for Fowl Manor.

'You know, Artemis,' he said, glancing in the mirror. 'We're going up against the Russian Mafiya. I've had dealings with these people before. They don't negotiate. This could get bloody. If we take these gangsters on, people are going to get hurt. Most likely us.'

Artemis nodded absently, watching his own reflection in the window. He needed a plan. Something audacious and brilliant. Something that had never been attempted before. Artemis was not unduly worried on that front. His brain had never let him down.

TARA SHUTTLE PORT

The fairy shuttle port at Tara was an impressive operation. Ten thousand cubic metres of terminal concealed beneath an overgrown hillock in the middle of the McGraney farm.

For centuries, the McGraneys had respected the fairy fort's boundaries and, for centuries, they had enjoyed exceptional good luck. Illnesses mysteriously cleared up overnight. Priceless art treasures unearthed themselves with incredible regularity, and mad cow disease seemed to avoid their herds altogether.

Having solved her visa problem, Holly finally made her way to the security door and slipped through the holographic camouflage. She had managed to secure a set of Koboi DoubleDex for the trip. The rig ran on a satellite-bounced solar battery, and employed a revolutionary wing design. There were two sets, or decks; one fixed for gliding, and a smaller set for manoeuvrability. Holly had been dying to try out the DoubleDex, but only a few rigs had made their way across from Koboi Labs. Foaly was reluctant to let them out because he hadn't designed them. Professional envy. Holly had taken advantage of his absence from the lab to swipe a set from the rack.

She soared fifteen metres above the ground, allowing unfiltered surface air to fill her lungs. Though laden with pollutants, it was still sweeter than the recycled tunnel variety. For several minutes, she enjoyed the experience, before turning her concentration to the mission at hand: how to abduct Artemis Fowl.

Not from his home, Fowl Manor, that was for certain. Legally, she put herself on very shaky ground by entering a dwelling without permission. Even though, technically, Fowl had invited her in by kidnapping her last year. Not many lawyers would take your case on the basis of that defence. Anyway, the manor was a virtual fortress and had already seen off an entire LEP retrieval team. Why should she fare any better?

There was also the complication that Artemis could very well be expecting her, especially if he was trading with the B'wa Kell. The idea of walking into a trap did not appeal to Holly. She had already been imprisoned once in Fowl Manor. Doubtless her cell was still furnished.

Holly activated the computer navigation package, calling up Fowl Manor on her helmet visor. A soft crimson light began to blip beside the 3D plan of the house. The building had been red-flagged by the LEP. Holly groaned. Now she would be treated to a video warning, just in case there was one Recon officer under the world who had not heard of Artemis Fowl.

Corporal Lili Frond's face appeared on the screen. Of course they chose Lili for this assignment. The bimbo face of the LEP. Sexism was alive and well and living in Police Plaza. It was rumoured that Frond's LEP scores had been bumped up because of her descendancy from the elfin king.

'You have selected Fowl Manor,' said Frond's image, fluttering her eyelids. 'This is a red-flagged building. Unauthorized access is strictly forbidden. Do not even attempt a fly-over.'

Artemis Fowl is considered an active threat to the People.'

A picture of Fowl appeared beside Frond, a digitally enhanced scowl on his face.

'His accomplice, known only as Butler, is not to be approached under any circumstances. He is generally armed and always dangerous.'

Butler's massive head appeared beside the two other images. Armed and dangerous hardly did him justice. He was the only human in history to have taken on a troll and won.

Holly sent the co-ordinates to the flight computer and let the wings do the steering for her. The countryside sped by below. Even since her last visit, the Mud People infestation seemed to have taken a stronger hold. There was barely an acre of land without dozens of their dwellings digging into its soil, and barely a mile of river without one of their factories pouring its poison into the waters.

The sun finally dipped below the horizon and Holly raised the filters on her visor. Time was on her side now. She had the entire night to come up with a plan. Holly found that she missed Foaly's sarcastic comments in her ear. Annoying as the centaur's observations were, they generally proved accurate and had saved her hide on more than one occasion. She tried to establish a link, but the flares were still high and there was no reception. Nothing but static.

Fowl Manor loomed in the distance, completely dominating the surrounding landscape. Holly scanned the building with her thermal bar and found nothing but insect and small rodent life forms. Spiders and mice. Nobody home. That suited her fine. She landed on the head of a particularly gruesome stone gargoyle, and settled in to wait.

FOWL MANOR, DUBLIN, IRELAND

The original Fowl castle had been built by Lord Hugh Fowl in the fifteenth century, overlooking low-lying country on all sides. A tactic borrowed from the Normans: never let your enemies sneak up on you. Over the centuries, the castle had been extensively remodelled until it became a manor, but the attention to security remained. The manor was surrounded by metre-thick walls, and wired with a state-of-the-art security system.

Butler pulled off the road, opening the estate gates with a remote. He glanced back at his employer's pensive face. Sometimes he thought that, in spite of all his contacts, informants and employees, Artemis Fowl was the loneliest boy he'd ever met.

'We could bring a couple of those fairy blasters,' he said.

Butler had relieved LEPretrieval One of their weaponry during the previous year's siege.

Artemis nodded. 'Good idea, but remove the nuclear batteries and put the blasters in a bag with some old games and books. We can pretend they're toys if we're captured.'

'Yes, sir. Good thinking.'

The Bentley Red Label crunched up the driveway, activating the ground's security lights. There were several lamps on in the main house. These were on randomly alternating timers.

Butler undid his seat belt, stepping lithely from the Bentley.

'You need anything special, Artemis?'

Artemis nodded. 'Grab some caviar from the kitchen. You wouldn't believe the muck they feed us in Bartleby's for ten thousand a term.'

Butler smiled again. A teenager asking for caviar. He'd never get used to it.

The smile withered on his lips halfway to the recently remodelled entrance. A shiver passed across his heart. He knew that feeling well. His mother used to say that someone had just walked over his grave. A sixth sense. Gut instinct. There was peril somewhere. Invisible, but

here nevertheless.

Holly spotted the headlights raking the sky from over a mile away. Optix were no good from this vantage point. Even when the automobile's windscreen came into view, the glass was tinted and the shadows beyond were deep. She felt her heart rate increase at the sight of Fowl's car.

The Bentley wound along the avenue, flickering between the rows of willow and horse chestnut. Holly ducked instinctively, though she was completely shielded from human eyes. You couldn't be certain with Artemis Fowl's manservant. Last year Artemis had cannibalized a fairy helmet, constructing an eyepiece that allowed Butler to spot and neutralize an entire crack squad of LEPretrieval commandos. It was hardly likely that he was wearing the lens at the moment but, as Trouble Kelp and his boys had learned, it didn't pay to underestimate Artemis or his manservant.

Holly set the Neutrino to slightly above the recommended stun setting. A couple of Butler's brain cells might get fried, but she wasn't about to lose any sleep over it.

The car swung into the driveway, crunching across the gravel. Butler climbed out. Holly felt her back teeth grinding. Once upon a time, she had saved his life, healing him after a mortal encounter with a troll. She wasn't sure if she'd do it again.

Holding her breath, LEPrecon Captain Holly Short set the DoubleDex to slow descent. She dropped soundlessly, skimming past the storeys, and aimed her weapon at Butler's chest. Now there was a target a sun-blinded dwarf couldn't miss.

The human couldn't have detected her presence. Not possible. Yet something made him pause. He stopped and sniffed the air. The Mud Man was like a dog. No, not a dog, a wolf. A wolf with a big handgun.

Holly focused her helmet lens on the weapon, sending a photo to her computer database. Moments later, a hi-res rotating 3D image of the gun appeared in the corner of her visor.

'Sig Sauer,' said a recorded byte of Foaly's voice. 'Nine millimetre. Thirteen in the magazine. Big bullets. One of these hits you and it could blow your head off; something even the magic can't fix. Other than that you should be all right, presuming you remembered to wear the regulation above-ground micro-fibre jumpsuit recently patented by me. Then again, being a Recon jock, you probably didn't.'

Holly scowled. Foaly was all the more annoying when he was right. She had jumped on the first available shuttle without even bothering to change into an above-ground suit.

Holly's eyes were level with Butler's now, yet she was still hovering over a metre from the ground. She released the visor seals, wincing at the pneumatic hiss.

Butler heard the escaping gas, swinging the Sig Sauer towards the source.

'Fairy,' he said. 'I know you're there. Unshield or I start shooting.'

This was not exactly the tactical advantage Holly had in mind. Her visor was up, and the manservant's finger was creaking on his pistol's hair trigger. She took a deep breath and shut down her shield.

'Hello, Butler,' she said evenly.

Butler cocked the Sig Sauer. 'Hello, Captain. Come down slowly, and don't try any of your . . .'

'*Put your gun away,*' said Holly, her voice layered with the hypnotic mesmer.

Butler fought it, the gun barrel shaking erratically.

'*Put it down, Butler. Don't make me fry your brain.*'

A vein pulsed in Butler's eyelid.

Unusual, thought Holly. I've never seen that before.

'Don't fight me, Mud Man. Give in to it.'

Butler opened his mouth to speak. To warn Artemis. She pushed harder, the magic cascading around the human's head.

'I said put it down!'

A bead of sweat ran down the bodyguard's cheek.

'PUT IT DOWN!'

And Butler did, gradually and grudgingly.

Holly smiled. *'Good, Mud Man. Now, back to the car and act as though nothing's wrong.'*

The manservant's legs obeyed, ignoring the signals from his own brain.

Holly buzzed up her shield. She was going to enjoy this.

Artemis was composing an e-mail on his laptop.

Dear Principal Guiney . . . it read . . .

Because of your counsellor's tactless interrogation of my little Arty, I have taken him out of school for a course of therapy sessions with real professionals in the Mont Gaspard Clinic in Switzerland. I am considering legal action. Do not attempt to contact me as that would only serve to irritate me further and, when irritated, I generally call my attorneys.

Sincerely, Angeline Fowl

Artemis sent the message, allowing himself the luxury of a small grin. It would have been nice to watch Principal Guiney's expression when he read the electronic letter. Unfortunately, the button camera he'd planted in the headmaster's office could only be accessed within a mile radius.

Butler opened the driver's door and, after a moment, slipped into the seat.

Artemis folded his phone into its wallet. 'Captain Short, I presume. Why don't you stop vibrating and settle into the visible spectrum?'

Holly speckled into view. There was a gleaming gun in her hand. Guess where it was pointed.

'Really, Holly, is that necessary?'

Holly snorted. 'Well, let's see. Kidnapping, actual bodily harm, extortion, conspiracy to commit murder. I'd say it's necessary.'

'Please, Captain Short,' said Artemis, with a smile, 'I was young and selfish. Believe it or not, I do harbour some doubts over that particular venture.'

'Not enough doubts to return the gold?'

'No,' admitted Artemis. 'Not quite.'

'How did you know I was here?'

Artemis steepled his fingers. 'There were several clues. One, Butler did not conduct his usual bomb check under the car. Two, he returned without the items he went to fetch. Three, the door was left open for several seconds, something no good security man would permit. And four, I detected a slight haze as you entered the vehicle. Elementary really.'

Holly scowled. 'Observant little Mud Boy, aren't you?'

'I try. Now, Captain Short, if you would be so kind as to tell me why you are here.'
'As if you don't know.'

Artemis thought for a moment. 'Interesting. I would guess that something has happened. Obviously something that I am being held responsible for.' He raised an eyebrow fractionally. An intense expression of emotion for Artemis Fowl. 'There are humans trading with the People.'

'Very impressive,' said Holly. 'Or it would be if we didn't both know that you're behind it. And if we can't get the truth out of you, I'm sure your computer files will prove most revealing.'

Artemis closed the laptop's lid. 'Captain. I realize there is no love lost between us, but I don't have time for this now. It is imperative that you give me a few days to sort out my affairs.'

'No can do, Fowl. There are a few people below ground who would like a word.'

Artemis shrugged. 'I suppose after what I did, I can't really expect any consideration.'

'That's right. You can't.'

'Well then,' sighed Artemis. 'I don't suppose I have a choice.'

Holly smiled. 'That's right, Fowl, you don't.'

'Shall we go?' Artemis's tone was meek, but his brain was sparking off ideas. Maybe co-operating with the fairies wasn't such a bad idea. They had certain abilities after all.

'Why not?' Holly turned to Butler. '*Drive south. Stay on the back roads.*'

'Tara, I presume. I often wondered where exactly the entrance to El was.'

'Keep wondering, Mud Boy,' muttered Holly. '*Now, sleep.* All this deduction is wearing me out.'

CHAPTER 4: FOWL IS FAIR

ARTEMIS woke in the LEP interrogation room. He could have been in any police interview room in the world. Same uncomfortable furniture, same old routine. Root jumped right in. 'OK, Fowl, start talking.' Artemis took a moment to get his bearings. Holly and Root were facing him across a low plastic-topped table. A high-watt bulb shone directly into his face.

'Really, Commander. Is this it? I expected more.' 'Oh there's more. Just not for criminals like you.' Artemis noted that his hands were shackled to the chair.

'You're not still upset about last year, are you? After all, I won. That is supposed to be that, according to your own Book.'

Root leaned forward until the tip of his cigar was centimetres from Artemis's nose. 'This is an entirely different case, Mud Boy. So don't give me the innocent act.'

Artemis was unperturbed. 'Which one are you? Good Cop or Bad Cop?'

Root laughed heartily, the tip of his cigar drawing patterns in the air. 'Good Cop, Bad Cop! Hate to tell you this, Dorothy, but you ain't in Kansas any more.' The commander loved quoting *The Wizard of Oz*. Three of his cousins were in the movie.

A figure emerged from the shadows. It had a tail, four legs, two arms and was holding what looked like a pair of common kitchen plungers.

'OK, Mud Boy,' said the figure. 'Just relax and this might not hurt too much.'

Foaly attached the suction cups to Artemis's eyes and the boy immediately fell unconscious.

'The sedative is in the rubber seals,' explained the centaur. 'Gets in through the pores. They never see it coming. Tell me I'm not the cleverest individual in the universe.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Root innocently. 'That pixie Koboï is one pretty sharp female.'

Foaly stamped a hoof angrily. 'Koboï? Koboï? Those wings of hers are ridiculous. If you ask me, we're using far too much Koboï technology these days. It's not good to let one company have all the LEP's business.'

'Unless it's yours, of course.'

'I'm serious, Julius. I know Opal Koboï from my days at university. She's not stable. There are Koboï chips in all the new Neutrinos. If those labs go under, all we'd have left are the DNA cannons in Police Plaza and a few cases of electric stun guns.'

Root snorted. 'Koboï just upgraded every gun and vehicle in the force. Three times the power, half the heat emission. Better than the last statistics from your lab, Foaly.'

Foaly threaded a set of fibre-optic cables back to the computer.

'Yes, well, maybe if the Council would give me a decent budget . . .'

'Quit your moaning, Foaly. I saw the budget for this machine. It better do more than unblock the drains.'

Foaly flicked his tail, highly offended.

'This is a Retimager, I'm considering going private with this baby.'

'And it does what exactly?'

Foaly activated a plasma screen on the holding-cell wall.

'You see these dark circles? These are the human's retinas. Every image leaves a tiny etching, like a photo negative. We can feed whatever pictures we want into the computer and

search for matches.'

Root didn't exactly fall to his knees in awe. 'Isn't that handy.'

'Well, yes, it is actually. Observe.'

Foaly called up an image of a goblin, cross-referencing it with the Retimager's database.

'For every matching point we get a hit. About two hundred hits is normal. General shape of the head, features and so on. Anything significantly above that and he's seen that goblin before.'

One eighty-six flashed up on the screen.

'Negative on the goblin. Let's try a Softnose.'

Again, the count was under two hundred.

'Another negative. Sorry, Captain, but Master Fowl here is innocent. He's never even seen a goblin, much less traded with the B'wa Kell.'

'They could have mind-wiped him.'

Foaly removed the seals from Artemis's eyes. 'That's the beauty of this baby. Mind-wipes don't work. The Retimager operates on actual physical evidence. You'd have to scrub the retinas.'

'Anything on the human's computer?'

'Plenty,' replied Foaly. 'But nothing incriminating. Not a single mention of goblins or batteries.'

Root scratched his square jaw. 'What about the big one? He could have been the go-between.'

'Did him already with the Retimager. Nothing. Face it, the LEP have pulled in the wrong Mud Men. Wipe 'em and send 'em home.'

Holly nodded. The commander didn't.

'Wait a minute. I'm thinking.'

'About what?' asked Holly. 'The sooner we get Artemis Fowl's nose out of our business, the better.'

'Maybe not. Since they're already here . . .'

Holly's jaw dropped. 'Commander. You don't know Fowl like I do. Give him half a chance and he'll be a bigger problem than the goblins.'

'Maybe he could help us with our Mud Man problem.'

'I have to object, Commander. These humans are not to be trusted.'

Root's face would have glowed in the dark.

'Do you think I like this, Captain? Do you think I relish the idea of crawling to this Mud Boy? I do not. I would rather swallow live stink worms than ask Artemis Fowl for help. But someone is powering the B'wa Kell's arms, and I need to find out who. So get with the programme, Holly. There's more at stake here than your little vendetta.'

Holly bit her tongue. She couldn't oppose the commander, not after all he'd done for her, but asking Artemis Fowl for help was the wrong course of action whatever the situation. She didn't doubt for a minute that the human would have a solution to their problem, but at what cost?

Root drew a deep breath. 'OK, Foaly, bring him round. And fit him with a translator. Speaking Mud Man gives me a headache.'

*

Artemis massaged the puffy skin beneath his eyes.

'Sedative in the seals?' he said, glancing at Foaly. 'Micro-needles?'

The centaur was impressed. 'You're pretty sharp for a Mud Boy.'

Artemis touched the crescent-shaped nodule fixed above his ear.

'Translator?'

Foaly nodded at the commander. 'Speaking in tongues gives some people a headache.'

Artemis straightened his school tie. 'I see. Now, how can I be of service?'

'What makes you think we need help from you, human?' growled Root around the butt of his cigar.

The boy smirked. 'I have a feeling, Commander, that if you did not need something from me, I would be regaining consciousness in my own bed, with absolutely no memory of our encounter.'

Foaly hid his grin behind a hairy hand.

'You're lucky you're not waking up in a cell,' said Holly.

'Still bitter, Captain Short? Can't we wipe the slate clean?'

Holly's glare was all the answer he needed.

Artemis sighed. 'Very well. I shall guess. There are humans trading with the Lower Elements. And you need Butler to track these merchants down. Close enough?'

The fairies were silent for a moment. Hearing it from Fowl suddenly brought the reality home to them.

'Close enough,' admitted Root. 'OK, Foaly, bring Mud Boy up to speed.'

The consultant loaded a file from the LEP central server. A series of Network News clips flashed up on the plasma screen. The reporter was a middle-aged elf with a quiff the size of a Honolulu roller.

'Downtown Haven,' crooned the reporter. 'Another contraband seizure by the LEP. Hollywood laser disks with an estimated street value of five hundred gold grams. The B'wa Kell goblin triad is suspected.'

'It gets worse,' said Root grimly.

Artemis smiled. 'There's worse?'

The reporter appeared again. This time flames billowed from the windows of a warehouse behind him. His quiff looked a bit crispy.

'Tonight the B'wa Kell has staked its claim to the East Bank by torching a warehouse used by Kobo Laboratories. Apparently the pixie with the golden touch refused to pay the triad's protection fee.'

The flames were replaced by another news bite, this time featuring an angry mob.

'Controversy today outside Police Plaza as the public protest at the LEP's failure to deal with the goblin problem. Many ancient houses have been put out of business by the B'wa Kell's racketeering. Most heavily targeted has been Kobo Laboratories, which has suffered six counts of sabotage in the past month alone.'

Foaly froze the image. The public did not look happy.

'The thing you have to understand, Fowl, is that goblins are dumb. I'm not insulting them. It's scientifically proven. Brains no bigger than rats.'

Artemis nodded. 'So who's organizing them?'

Root ground out his cigar. 'We don't know. But it's getting worse. The B'wa Kell has graduated from petty crime to an all-out war on the police. Last night we intercepted a delivery of batteries from the surface. These batteries are being used to power outlawed Softnose laser weapons.'

'And Captain Short thought that I might be the Mud Man on the other end of the deal.'

'Can you blame me?' muttered Holly.

Artemis ignored the comment. 'How do you know the goblins aren't just ripping off wholesalers? After all, batteries are rarely under guard.'

Foaly chuckled. 'No, I don't think you understand just how stupid goblins are. Let me give you an example. One of the B'wa Kell generals, and this is their top fairy, was caught trying to pass off forged credit slips by signing his own name. No, whoever is behind this would need a human contact to make sure the deals weren't fouled up.'

'So you'd like me to find out who this human contact is,' said Artemis. 'And more importantly, how much he knows.'

As he spoke, Artemis's mind was racing. He could work this entire situation to his advantage. The People's powers would be valuable aces to hold in a negotiation with mobsters. The seeds of a plan began to sprout in his brain.

Root nodded reluctantly. 'That's it. I can't risk putting LEPrecon agents above ground. Who knows what technology the goblins have traded. I could be walking my men into a trap. As humans, you could both blend in.'

'Butler blend in?' said Artemis, smiling. 'I doubt it.'

'At least he doesn't have four legs and a tail,' observed Foaly.

'Point taken. And there is no doubt that if any man alive can track down your rogue trader, it's Butler. But . . .'

Here we go, thought Holly. Artemis Fowl does nothing for nothing.

'But?' prompted Root.

'But if you want my help, I will require something in return.'

'What exactly?' said Root warily.

'I need transport to Russia,' replied Artemis. 'The Arctic Circle to be precise. And I need help with a rescue attempt.'

Root frowned. 'Northern Russia is not good for us. We can't shield there because of the radiation.'

'Those are my conditions,' said Artemis. 'The man I intend to rescue is my father. For all I know, it's already too late. So I really don't have time to negotiate.'

The Mud Boy sounded sincere. Even Holly's heart softened for a moment. But you never knew with Artemis Fowl -- this could all be part of yet another scheme. Root made an executive decision.

'Deal,' he said, holding out his hand.

They shook. Fairy and human. A historic moment.

'Good,' said Root. 'Now, Foaly, wake the big one and give that goblin shuttle a quick systems check.'

'What about me?' asked Holly. 'Back on stakeout duty?'

If Root had not been a commander, he probably would have cackled. 'Oh no, Captain. You're the best shuttle pilot we have. You're going to Paris.'

CHAPTER 5: DADDY'S GIRL

KOBOI LABORATORIES, EAST BANK, HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS

KOBOI Laboratories was carved from the rock of Haven's East Bank. It stood eight storeys high, surrounded by half a mile of granite on five sides, with access from the front only. Management had beefed up their security, and who could blame them? After all, the B'wa Kell had specifically targeted Koboï for arson attacks. The Council had gone so far as to grant the company special weapons permits -- if Koboï went under, the entire Haven City defence network went under with it.

Any B'wa Kell goblins attempting to storm Koboï Laboratories would have been met with DNA-coded stun cannons, which scanned an intruder before blasting him.

There were no blind spots in the building, no place to hide. The system was foolproof.

But the goblins didn't have to worry about that. The Laboratories' defences were actually designed to keep out any LEP officers who might come snooping around at the wrong moment. It was Opal Koboï herself who was funding the goblin triad. The attacks on Koboï were actually a smokescreen to divert suspicions away from her own personal dealings: the tiny pixie was the mastermind behind the battery operation and the increased B'wa Kell activity. Well, one of the masterminds. But why would an individual of almost limitless wealth possibly wish to associate with a goblin tunnel gang?

Since the day of her birth, nothing much had ever been expected of Opal Koboï. Born to a family of old-money pixies on Principality Hill, her parents would have been quite content had young Opal done nothing more than attend private school, complete some wishy-washy Arts degree and marry a suitable vice-president.

In fact, as far as her father, Ferall Koboï, was concerned, a dream daughter would have been moderately intelligent, quite pretty and, of course, complacent. But Opal did not display the personality traits Ferall would have wished for. By the age of ten months she was already walking unaided, by a year and a half she had a vocabulary of over five hundred words. Before her second birthday she had dismantled her first hard drive.

Opal grew to be precocious, headstrong and beautiful. A dangerous combination. Ferall lost count of the times he sat his daughter down, advising her to leave business to the male pixies. Eventually Opal refused to see him at all. Her blatant hostility was worrying.

Ferall was right to be worried. Opal's first action in college was to ditch her History of Art degree in favour of the male-dominated Brotherhood of Engineers Masters. No sooner was the scroll in her hand than Opal set up shop in direct opposition to her father. Patents quickly followed. An engine muffler that doubled as an energy streamliner, a 3D entertainment system and, of course, her speciality, the DoubleDex wing series.

Once Opal had destroyed her father's business, she proceeded to buy shares in it at rock-bottom prices, and then incorporated her businesses under the banner of Koboï Laboratories. Within five years, Koboï Laboratories held more defence contracts than any other company. Within ten years, Opal Koboï had personally registered more patents than any fairy alive. Except the centaur Foaly.

But it wasn't enough. Opal Koboï yearned for the kind of power that hadn't been held by

any single fairy since the days of the monarchy. Luckily, she knew someone who might be able to assist her with that particular ambition. A disillusioned officer in the LEP, and a classmate from her college days. A certain Briar Cudgeon . . .

Briar had good reason to despise the LEP; after all, they had allowed his public humiliation at the hands of Julius Root to go unpunished. Not only that, but he had been stripped of his commander's acorns after his disastrous involvement in the Artemis Fowl Affair . . .

It had been a simple matter for Opal to slip a truth pill into Cudgeon's drink in one of Haven's swankier eateries. To her glee, she found that the delightfully twisted Cudgeon was already formulating a plan to topple the LEP. Quite an ingenious plan as it happened. All he needed was a partner. One with large reserves of gold and a secure facility at her disposal. Opal was happy to supply both.

Opal was curled, catlike, in her hoverchair, eavesdropping on the goings-on in Police Plaza when Cudgeon entered the facility. She had installed mole cameras in the LEP network when her engineers were upgrading their system. The units operated on precisely the same frequency as Police Plaza's own surveillance cameras, plus they drew power from the heat leaking from the LEP's fibre optics. Completely undetectable.

'Well?' demanded Cudgeon, with customary bluntness.

Koboi didn't bother to turn around. It had to be Briar. Only he had the necessary access chip to the inner sanctum, implanted in his knuckle.

'We lost the last shipment of power cells. A routine LEP stakeout. Bad luck.'

'D'Arvit!' swore Cudgeon. 'Still, no matter. We have enough stored. And to the LEP, they are simply batteries after all.'

Opal took a breath. 'The goblins were armed . . .'

'Don't tell me.'

'With Softnoses.'

Cudgeon pounded a worktop. 'Those idiots! I warned them not to use those weapons. Now Julius will know something is afoot.'

'He may know,' said Opal placatingly. 'But he is powerless to stop us. By the time they figure it out, it will already be too late.'

Cudgeon did not smile. He hadn't in over a year. Instead his scowl grew more pronounced.

'Good. My time is at hand . . . Perhaps we should have simply manufactured the batteries ourselves,' he mused.

'No. Just to build a factory would have set us back two years, and there's no guarantee that Foaly wouldn't have discovered it. We had no choice.'

Koboi swivelled to face her partner. 'You look terrible. Have you been using that ointment I gave you?'

Cudgeon rubbed his head tenderly. It was bubbled with horrific lumps. 'It doesn't work. There's cortisone in it. I'm allergic.'

Cudgeon's condition was unusual, perhaps unique. The previous year he had been sedated by Commander Root during the Fowl Manor siege. Unfortunately, the tranquillizer had reacted badly with some banned mind-accelerating substances the former acting-commander had been experimenting with. Cudgeon was left with a forehead like melted tar, plus a droopy eye. Ugly and demoted, not a great combination.

'You should get those boils lanced. I can barely stand the sight of you.'

Sometimes Opal Koboi forgot who she was talking to. Briar Cudgeon was not the usual

corporate lackey. He calmly drew a customized Redboy blaster, firing two bursts into the hoverchair's arm. The contraption whirled across the stippled rubber tiles, coming to rest leaving Opal sprawled across a bank of hard drives.

The disgraced LEP elf caught Opal by the pointed chin. 'You better get used to looking at me, my dear Opal. Because soon this face will be on every view screen under this planet, and on top of it.'

The tiny pixie curled her fingers into a fist. She was unaccustomed to insubordination, not to mention actual violence. But at moments like this she could see the madness in Cudgeon's eyes. The drugs had cost him more than his magic and looks, they had cost him his mind.

And suddenly he was himself again, graciously helping her up as though nothing had happened.

'Now, my dear, progress report. The B'wa Kell is eager for blood.'

Opal smoothed the front of her catsuit. 'Captain Short is escorting the human, Artemis Fowl, to E37.'

'Fowl is here?' exclaimed Cudgeon. 'Of course! I should have guessed that he would be suspected. This is perfect! Our human slave will take care of him -- Carrere has been mesmerized. I still have *that* power.'

Koboi applied a layer of blood-red lipstick. 'There could be trouble if Carrere is captured.'

'Don't worry,' Cudgeon assured her. 'Monsieur Carrere has been mesmerized so many times that his mind is blanker than a wiped disk. He couldn't tell any tales, even if he wanted to. Then, once he has done our dirty work for us, the French police will lock him up in a nice padded cell.'

Opal giggled. For someone who never smiled, Cudgeon had a delicious sense of humour.

CHAPTER 6: PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

CHUTE E37, HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS

THE unlikely allies took the goblin shuttle up E37. Holly was none too pleased. First of all, she was being ordered to work with public-enemy number one, Artemis Fowl. And secondly, the goblin shuttle was held together by spit and prayers.

Holly hooked a corn rig over one pointy ear. 'Hey, Foaly? You there?'

'Right here, Captain.'

'Remind me again why I'm flying this old slammer.' LEPrecon pilots referred to suspect shuttles as *slammers* because of their alarming tendency to slam into the chute walls.

'The reason you're flying that old slammer, Captain, is that the goblins built this shuttle inside the port, and all three of the original access ramps were removed years ago. It would take days to get a new rig in there. So, I'm afraid we're stuck with the goblin ship.'

Holly strapped herself into the pilot's wraparound seat. The thruster toggles almost seemed to jump into her hands. For a split second, Captain Short's natural good humour returned. She was an ace pilot, top of her class in the Academy. On her final assessment, Wing Commander Vinyaya had written that Cadet *Short could fly a shuttle pod through the gap in your teeth*. It was a compliment with a sting in the tail. On her first try-out in a pod, Holly had lost control, crash-landing the craft two metres from Vinyaya's nose.

So, for five seconds, Holly was happy. Then she remembered who her passengers were.

'I wonder, could you tell me,' said Artemis, settling into the co-pilot's chair, 'how close the Russian terminal is to Murmansk?'

'Civilians behind the yellow line,' growled Holly, ignoring the enquiry.

Artemis pressed on. 'This is important to me. I am trying to plan a rescue.'

Holly grinned tightly. 'There's so much irony here, I could write a poem. The kidnapper looking for help with a kidnapping.'

Artemis rubbed his temples. 'Holly, I am a criminal. It's what I do best. When I abducted you, I was thinking only of the ransom. You were never supposed to be in any danger.'

'Oh really?' said Holly. 'Apart from bio-bombs and trolls.'

'True,' admitted Artemis. 'Sometimes plans don't translate smoothly from paper to real life.' He paused, cleaning some non-existent dirt from his manicured nails. 'I have matured, Captain. This is my father. I need all the information I can gather before facing the Mafiya.'

Holly relented. It wasn't easy growing up without a father. She knew. Her own father had passed away when she was barely sixty. More than twenty years ago now.

'OK, Mud Boy, listen up. I'm only saying this once.'

Artemis sat up. Butler stooped as he entered the cockpit. He could smell a war story.

'Over the past two centuries, with the advances in human technology, the LEP have been forced to shut down over sixty terminals. We pulled out of northern Russia in the sixties. The entire Kola peninsula is a nuclear disaster. The People have no tolerance to radiation, we never built up a resistance. In truth, there wasn't much to close down. Just a Grade Three terminal and a couple of cloaking projectors. The People aren't very fond of the Arctic. A bit frosty. Everybody was glad to be leaving. So, to answer your question: there's one unmanned terminal, with little or no above-ground facilities, located about twenty clicks north of Murmansk --'

Foaly's voice blurted from the intercom, interrupting what was dangerously close to a civil conversation. 'OK, Captain. You've got a clear run to the subway. There's still a bit of waffle from the last flare, so go easy.'

Holly pulled down her mouth mike. 'Roger that, Foaly. Have the rad suits ready when I get back. We're on a tight schedule.'

Foaly chuckled. 'Take it easy on the thrusters, Holly. Technically, this is Artemis's first time in the chutes, seeing as he and Butler were mesmerized on the way down. We wouldn't want him getting a fright.'

Holly gunned the throttle quite a bit more than was absolutely necessary. 'No,' she growled. 'We wouldn't want him getting a fright.'

Artemis decided to strap on his restraining harness. A good idea, as it turned out.

Captain Short gunned the makeshift shuttle down the magnetized approach rail. The fins shook, sending twin waves of sparks cascading past the portholes. Holly adjusted the internal gyroscopes, otherwise there'd be Mud People vomiting all over the cockpit.

Holly's thumbs hovered over the turbo buttons. 'OK. Well, let's see what this bucket can do.'

'Don't go trying for any records, Holly,' said Foaly over the speakers. 'That ship is not built for speed. I've seen more aerodynamic dwarfs.'

Holly grunted. After all, what was the point in flying slowly? None whatsoever. And if you happened to terrify a few Mud Men along the way, well, that was just an added bonus.

The service tunnel opened on to the main chute. Artemis gasped. It was an awe-inspiring sight. You could drop Mount Everest down this chute and it wouldn't even hit the sides. A deep red glow pulsed from the Earth's core like the fires of hell, and the constant crack of contracting rock smacked the hull like physical blows.

Holly fired up all four flight engines, tumbling the shuttle into the abyss. Her worries evaporated like the eddies of mist swirling around the cockpit. It was a fly-boy thing. The lower you went without pulling out of the dive, the tougher you were. Even the fiery demise of Retrieval Officer Bom Arbles couldn't stop the LEP pilots core diving. Holly held the current record. Five hundred metres from the Earth's core before dipping the flaps. That had cost her two weeks' suspension, plus a hefty fine.

Not today though. No records in a slammer. With the g-force rippling the skin on her cheeks, Holly dragged the joysticks back, pulling the nose out of vertical. It gave her no small satisfaction to hear both humans sigh with relief.

'OK, Foaly, we're on the up 'n' up. What's the situation above ground?'

She could hear Foaly tapping a keyboard. 'Sorry, Holly. I can't get a lock on any of our surface equipment. Too much radiation from the last flare. You're on your own. Holly eyed the two pale humans in the cockpit. On my own, she thought. I wish.

PARIS, FRANCE

So, if Artemis wasn't the human helping Cudgeon in his quest to arm the B'wa Kell, who was? Some tyrannical dictator? Perhaps a disgruntled general with access to an unlimited supply of power cells? Well, no. Not exactly.

Luc Carrere was responsible for selling batteries to the B'wa Kell. Not that you'd know it to look at him. In fact, he didn't even know it himself. Luc was a small-time French private eye, who was well known for his inefficiency. In PI circles, it was said that Luc couldn't trace a golf

ball in a barrel of mozzarella.

Cudgeon decided to use Luc for three reasons. One, Foaly's files showed that Carrere had a reputation as a wheeler-dealer. In spite of his ineptness as an investigator, Luc had a knack for laying his hand on whatever it was the client wanted to buy. Two, the man was greedy and had never been able to resist the lure of easy money. And three, Luc was stupid. And as every little fairy knows, weak minds are easier to mesmerize.

The fact that he had located Carrere in Foaly's database was nearly enough to make Cudgeon smile. Of course, Briar would have preferred not to have any human link in the chain. But a chain comprised completely of goblin links is one dumb chain.

Establishing contact with any Mud Man was not something Cudgeon took lightly. Deranged as he was, Briar was well aware of what would happen if the humans got wind of a new market below ground. They would swarm to the Earth's core like an army of red-backed flesh-eating ants. Cudgeon was not ready to meet the humans head on. Not yet. Not until he had the might of the LEP behind him.

So instead, Cudgeon sent Luc Carrere a little package. First class, shielded goblin mail . . .

Luc Carrere had shuffled into his office apartment' one July evening to find a small parcel lying on his desk. The package was nothing more than a FedEx delivery. Or something that looked very much like a FedEx delivery.

Luc slit the tape. Inside the box, cushioned on a nest of hundred-euro bills, was a small flat device of some kind. Like a portable CD player, but made from a strange black metal that seemed to absorb light. Luc would have shouted to reception and instructed his secretary to hold all calls. If he had had a reception. If he had had a secretary. Instead the PI began stuffing cash down his grease-stained shirt as though the notes would disappear.

Suddenly, the device popped open, clam-like, revealing a micro-screen and speakers. A shadowy face appeared on the display. Though Luc could see nothing but a pair of red-rimmed eyes, that was enough to set goose bumps popping across his back.

Funny though, because when the face began to speak, Luc's worries slid away like an old snakeskin. How could he have been worried? This person was obviously a friend. What a lovely voice. Like a choir of angels, all on its own.

'Luc Carrere?'

Luc nearly cried. Poetry.

'Oui. It's me.'

'Bonsoir. Do you see the money, Luc? It's all yours.' Sixty miles below ground, Cudgeon almost smiled. This was easier than expected. He had been worried that the dribble of power left in his brain wouldn't be sufficient to mesmerize the human. But this particular Mud Man seemed to have the will-power of a hungry hog faced with a trough of turnips.

Luc held two wads of cash in his fists. 'This money. It's mine? What do I have to do?'

'Nothing. The money is yours. Do whatever you want.'

Now Luc Carrere knew that there was no such thing as free cash, but that voice . . . That voice was truth in a micro-speaker.

'But there's more. A lot more.'

Luc stopped what he was doing, which was kissing a hundred-euro bill. 'More? How much more?'

The eyes seemed to glow crimson. *'As much as you want, Lac. But to get it, I need you to do me a favour.'*

Luc was hooked. 'Sure. What kind of favour?'

The voice emanating from the speaker was as clear as spring water. *'It's simple, not even illegal. I need batteries, Luc. Thousands of batteries. Maybe millions. Do you think you can get them for me?'*

Luc thought about it for about two seconds. The banknotes were tickling his chin. As a matter of fact, he had a contact on the river who regularly shipped boatloads of hardware to the Middle East, including batteries. Luc was confident that some of those shipments could be diverted.

'Batteries. Oui, certainment, I could do that.'

And so it went on for several months. Luc Carrere hit his contact for every battery he could lay his hands on. It was a sweet deal. Luc would crate the cells up in his apartment and in the morning they would be gone. In their place would sit a fresh pile of bills. Of course, the euros were fake, run off on an old Koboï printer, but Luc couldn't tell the difference. Nobody outside the Treasury could.

Occasionally, the voice on the screen would make a special request. Some fire suits, for example. But hey, Luc was a player now. Nothing was more than a phone call away. In six months, Luc Carrere went from a one-room studio to a fancy loft apartment in St Germain. So naturally, the Surete and Interpol were building separate cases against him. But Luc wasn't to know that. All he knew was that for the first time in his corrupt life, he was riding the gravy train.

One morning there was another parcel on his new marble-topped desk. Bigger this time. Bulkier. But Luc wasn't worried. It was probably more money.

Luc popped the top to reveal an aluminium case and a second communicator. The eyes were waiting for him.

'Bonjour, Luc. fa ra?'

'Bien,' replied Luc, mesmerized from the first syllable.

'I have a special assignment for you today. Do this right and you will never have to worry about money again. Your tool is in the case.'

'What is it?' asked the PI nervously. The instrument looked like a weapon and, even though Luc was mesmerized, Cudgeon did not have enough magic to completely suppress the Parisian's nature. The PI may have been devious, but he was no killer.

'It's a special camera, Luc, that's all. If you pull that thing that looks like a trigger, it takes a picture,' said Cudgeon.

'Oh,' said Luc Carrere blearily.

'Some friends of mine are coming to visit you. And I want you to take their picture. It's just a game we play.'

'How will I know your friends?' asked Luc. 'A lot of people visit me.'

'They will ask about the batteries. If they ask about the batteries, then you take their picture.'

'Sure. Great.' And it was great. Because the voice would never make him do anything wrong. The voice was his friend.

E37 SHUTTLE PORT

Holly steered the slammer through the chute's final section. A proximity sensor in the shuttle's nose set off the landing lights.

'Hmm,' muttered Holly.

Artemis squinted through the quartz windscreen. 'A problem?'

'No. It's just that those lights shouldn't be working. There hasn't been a power source in the terminal since the last century.'

'Our goblin friends, I presume.'

Holly frowned. 'Doubtful. It takes half a dozen goblins to turn on a glow cube. Wiring a shuttle port takes real know-how. Elfin know-how.'

'The plot thickens,' said Artemis. If he'd had a beard, he would have stroked it. 'I smell a traitor. Now, who would have access to all this technology and a motive for selling it?'

Holly pointed the shuttle's cone towards the landing nodes. 'We'll find out soon enough. You just get me a live trader, and my mesmer will soon have him spilling his guts.'

The shuttle docked with a pneumatic hiss as the bay's rubber collar formed an airtight seal around the outer hull.

Butler was out of his chair before the seat-belt light winked off, ready for action.

'Just don't kill anyone,' warned Holly. 'That's not how the LEP likes to operate. Anyway, dead Mud Men don't rat on their partners.'

She brought up a schematic on the wall-screen. It depicted Paris's old city. 'OK,' she said, pointing to a bridge across the Seine. 'We're here. Under this bridge, sixty metres from Notre-Dame. The cathedral, not the football team. The dock is disguised as a bridge support. Stand in the doorway until I give you a green light. We have to be careful here. The last thing we need is some Parisian seeing you emerging from a brick wall.' . . . 'You're not accompanying us?' asked Artemis.

'Orders,' said Holly, scowling. 'Apparently this could be a trap. Who knows what hardware is pointed at the terminal door? Lucky for you, you're expendable. Irish tourists on holiday, you'll fit right in.'

'Lucky us. What leads do we have?'

Holly slid a disk into the console. 'Foaly stuck his Retimager on the goblin prisoner. Apparently he has seen this human.'

The captain brought up a mugshot on the screen. 'Foaly got a match on his Interpol files. Luc Carrere. Disbarred attorney, does a bit of PI work.'

She printed off a card. 'Here's his address. He just moved to a swanky new apartment. It could be nothing, but at least we have somewhere to start. I need you to immobilize him, and show him this.' Holly handed the bodyguard what looked like a diver's watch.

'What is it?' asked the manservant.

'Just a com screen. You put it in front of Carrere's face and I can mesmerize the truth out of him from down here. It also contains one of Foaly's doodahs: a personal shield. The Safetynet. A prototype, you'll be delighted to know. You have the honour of testing it. Touch the screen, and the micro-reactor generates a two-metre diameter sphere of tri-phased light. No good for solids, but laser bursts or concussion shocks are OK.'

'Hmm,' said Butler doubtfully. 'We don't get a lot of laser bursts above ground.'

'Hey, don't use it. Do I care?'

Butler studied the tiny instrument. 'One-metre radius? What about the bits that are sticking out.'

Holly thumped the manservant playfully in the stomach. 'My advice to you, big man, is curl up in a ball.'

'I'll try to remember that,' said Butler, cinching the strap around his wrist. 'You two try

not to kill each other while I'm gone.'

Artemis was surprised. It didn't happen very often. 'While you're gone? Surely you don't expect me to stay behind?'

Butler tapped his forehead. 'Don't worry, you'll see everything on the iris-cam.'

Artemis fumed for several moments, before settling back down into the co-pilot's seat. 'I know. I would only slow you down, and that, in turn, would slow down the search for my father.'

'Of course, if you insist'

'No. This is no time for childishness.'

Butler smiled gently. Childishness was one thing Master Artemis was hardly likely to be accused of.

'How long do I have?'

Holly shrugged. 'As long as it takes. Obviously the sooner the better for everybody's sake.' She glanced at Artemis. 'Especially his father's.'

In spite of everything, Butler felt good. This was life at its most basic. The hunt. Not exactly Stone Age, not with a large semi-automatic weapon under his arm. But the principle was the same: the survival of the fittest. And there was no doubt in Butler's mind that he was the fittest.

He followed Holly's directions to a service ladder, scaling it quickly to the doorway above. He waited beside the metal door until the light above changed from red to green, and the camouflaged entrance slid noiselessly back. The bodyguard emerged cautiously. While it was likely that the bridge was deserted, he could hardly explain himself away as a homeless person, dressed as he was in a dark designer suit.

Butler felt a breeze play across the shaven dome of his crown. The morning air felt good, even after a few hours below ground. He could easily imagine how fairies must feel, forced out of their native environment by humans. From what Butler had seen, if the People ever decided to reclaim what was theirs, the battle wouldn't last long. But luckily for mankind, fairies were a peace-loving people, and not prepared to go to war over real estate.

The coast was clear. Butler stepped casually on to the riverside walkway, proceeding west towards the St Germain district.

A riverboat swept past on his right, ferrying a hundred tourists around the city. Butler automatically covered his face with a massive hand. Just in case some of those tourists had cameras pointed in his direction.

The bodyguard mounted a set of stone steps to the road above. Behind him the pointed spire of Notre-Dame rose into the sky, and to his left the Eiffel Tower's famous profile punctured the clouds. Butler strode confidently across the main road, nodding at several French ladies who stopped to stare. He was familiar with this area of Paris, having spent a month recuperating here after a particularly dangerous assignment for the French Secret Service.

Butler strolled along Rue Jacob. Even at this hour, cars and lorries jammed the narrow street. Drivers leaned on their horns, hanging from car windows, Gallic tempers running wild. Mopeds dodged between bumpers, and several pretty girls strolled past. Butler smiled. Paris. He had forgotten.

Carrere's apartment was on Rue Bonaparte, opposite the church. Apartments in St Germain cost more per month than most Parisians made in a year. Butler ordered a coffee and croissant at the Bonaparte cafe, settling himself at an outside table. According to his calculations, it gave him the perfect view of Monsieur Carrere's balcony.

Butler didn't have long to wait. In less than an hour, the chunky Parisian appeared on the

balcony, leaning on the ornate railing for several minutes. He very obligingly presented front and side views of himself.

Holly's voice sounded in Butler's ear. 'That's our boy. Is he alone?'

'I can't tell,' muttered the bodyguard into his hand. The flesh-tone mike glued to his throat would pick up any vibrations and translate them for Holly.

'Just a sec.'

Butler heard a keyboard being tapped, and suddenly the iris-cam in his eye sparked. The vision in one eye jumped into a completely different spectrum.

'Heat-sensitive,' Holly informed him. 'Hot equals red. Cold equals blue. Not a very powerful system, but the lens should penetrate an outer wall.'

Butler cast a fresh eye over the apartment. There were three red objects in the room. One was Carrere's heart, which pulsed crimson in the centre of his pink body. The second appeared to be a kettle or possibly a coffee pot, and the third was a TV.

'OK. All clear, I'm going in.'

'Affirmative. Watch your step. This is a bit too convenient.'

'Agreed.'

Butler crossed the cobbled street to the four-storey apartment building. There was an intercom security system, but this structure was nineteenth century, and a solid shoulder at the right point popped the bolt right out of its housing.

'I'm in.'

There was noise on the stairs above. Someone coming this way. Butler wasn't unduly concerned. Nevertheless he slid a palm inside his jacket, fingers resting on his handgun's grip. It was unlikely he would need it. Even the most boisterous young bucks generally gave Butler a wide berth. Something to do with his merciless eyes. Being over two metres tall didn't hurt either.

A group of teenagers rounded the corner.

'*Excusez-moi*,' said Butler, gallantly stepping aside.

The girls giggled. The boys glared. One, a mono-eyebrowed rugby type, even thought about passing comment. Then Butler winked at him. It was a peculiar wink, somehow simultaneously cheerful and terrifying. No comments were passed.

Butler ascended to the fourth floor without incident. Carrere's apartment was on the gable end. Two walls of windows. Very expensive.

The bodyguard was considering his breaking and entering options when he noticed the door was open. Open doors generally meant one of two things: one, nobody was left alive to close it, or two, he was expected. Neither of these options appealed to him particularly.

Butler entered cautiously. The apartment walls were lined with open crates. Battery packs and fire suits poked through the Styrofoam packing. The floor was littered with thick wads of currency.

'Are you a friend?' It was Carrere. He was slumped in an oversized armchair, a weapon of some kind nestling in his lap.

Butler approached slowly. An important rule of combat is that every opponent is taken seriously.

'Take it easy.'

The Parisian raised the weapon. The grip was made for smaller fingers. A child, or a fairy. 'I asked if you were a friend.'

Butler cocked his own pistol. 'No need to shoot.'

'Stand still,' ordered Carrere. 'I'm not going to shoot you, just take your photo maybe. The voice told me.'

Holly's voice sounded in Butler's earpiece. 'Get closer. I need to see the eyes.'

Butler bolstered his weapon, taking a step forward. 'You see, no one has to get hurt here.'

'I'm going to enhance the image,' said Holly. 'This may sting a bit.'

The tiny camera in his eye buzzed, and suddenly Butler's vision was magnified by four -- which would have been just fine had the magnification not been accompanied by a sharp jolt of pain. Butler blinked back a stream of tears from his eye.

Below, in the goblin shuttle, Holly studied Luc's pupils. 'He's been mesmerized,' she pronounced. 'Several times. You see how the iris has actually become jagged. You mesmerize a human too much and they can go blind.'

Artemis studied the image. 'Is it safe to mesmerize him again?'

Holly shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. He's already under a spell. This particular individual is just following orders. His brain doesn't know a thing about it.'

Artemis grabbed the mike stand. 'Butler! Get out of there. Right now.'

In the apartment, Butler stood his ground. Any sudden movement might be his last.

'Butler,' said Holly. 'Listen carefully. That gun pointed at you is a wide-bore low-frequency blaster. We call it a Bouncer. It was developed for tunnel skirmishes. If he pulls that trigger, a wide arc laser is going to ricochet off the walls until it hits something.'

'I see,' muttered Butler.

'What did you say?' asked Carrere.

'Nothing. I just don't like having my photo taken.'

A spark of Luc's greedy personality surfaced. 'I like that watch on your wrist. It looks expensive. Is it a Rolex?'

'You don't want this,' said Butler, very reluctant to part with the com screen. 'It's cheap. A piece of trash.'

'Just give me the watch.'

Butler peeled back the strap of the instrument on his wrist. 'If I give you this watch, maybe you can tell me about all these batteries.'

'It is you! Say cheese,' squealed Carrere, forcing his pudgy thumb into the undersized trigger guard and pumping for all he was worth.

For Butler, time seemed to slow to a crawl. It was almost as though he were inside his personal time-stop. His soldier's brain absorbed all the facts and analysed his options. Carrere's finger was too far gone. In a moment, a wide-bore laser burst would be speeding his way, and would continue to bounce around the room until they were both dead. His gun was of no use in a situation like this. All he had was the Safetynet, but a two-metre sphere was not going to be enough. Not for two good-sized humans.

So, in the fraction of a second left to him, Butler formulated a new strategy. If the sphere could stop concussive waves coming towards him, perhaps it could stop them coming out of the blaster. Butler touched the screen of the Safetynet, and hurled the device in Carrere's direction.

Not a nanosecond too soon, a spherical shield blossomed, enveloping the expanding beam from Carrere's blaster: 360 degrees of protection. It was a sight to see, a fireworks display in a bubble. The shield hovered in the air, shafts of light ricocheting against the sphere's curved planes.

Carrere was hypnotized by the sight, and Butler took advantage of the distraction to disarm him.

'Start the engines,' grunted the bodyguard into his throat mike. 'The Surete are going to be all over this place in minutes. Foaly's Safetynet didn't stop the noise.'

'Roger that. What about Monsieur Carrere?'

Butler dumped the dazed Parisian flat on the carpet. 'Luc and I are going to have a little chat.'

For the first time Carrere seemed to be aware of his surroundings.

'Who are you?' he mumbled. 'What's happening?'

Butler ripped open the man's shirt, placing his palm flat on the Pi's heart. Time for a little trick he'd learned from Madame Ko, his Japanese sensei. 'Don't worry, Monsieur Carrere. I'm a doctor. There's been an accident, but you're perfectly fine.'

'An accident? I don't remember any accident.'

'Trauma. It's quite normal. I'm just going to check your vitals.'

Butler placed a thumb on Luc's neck, locating the artery. 'I'm going to ask you a few questions, to check for concussion.'

Luc didn't argue. Then again, who'd argue with a two-metre-plus Eurasian with muscles like a Michelangelo statue?

'Is your name Luc Carrere?'

'Yes.'

Butler noted the pulse rate. One from the heartbeat, and a second reference on the carotid artery. Steady, in spite of the accident.

'Are you a private eye?'

'I prefer the title investigator.'

No increase in pulse rate. The man was telling the truth.

'Have you ever sold batteries to a mystery buyer?'

'No, I have not,' protested Luc. 'What kind of doctor are you?'

The man's pulse sky-rocketed. He was lying.

'Answer the questions, Monsieur Carrere,' said Butler sternly. 'Just one more. Have you ever had dealings with goblins?'

Relief flooded through Luc. The police did not ask questions about fairies. 'What are you? Crazy? Goblins? I don't know what you're talking about.'

Butler closed his eyes, concentrating on the pounding beneath his thumb and palm. Luc's pulse had settled. He was telling the truth. He had never had any direct dealings with the goblins. Obviously the B'wa Kell wasn't that stupid.

Butler stood up, pocketing the Bouncer. He could hear the sirens on the street below.

'Hey, Doctor,' protested Luc. 'You can't just leave me like this.'

Butler eyed him coldly. 'I would take you with me, but the police will want to know why your apartment is full of what I suspect are counterfeit bills.'

Luc could only watch with his mouth open as the giant figure disappeared into the corridor. He knew he should run, but Luc Carrere hadn't run more than fifty metres since gym class in the nineteen seventies, and anyway, his legs had suddenly turned to jelly. The thought of a long stretch in prison can do that to a person.

CHAPTER 7: JOINING THE DOTS

POLICE PLAZA

ROOT pointed the finger of authority at Holly.

'Congratulations, Captain. You managed to lose some LEP technology.' Holly was ready for that one. 'Not strictly my fault, sir. The human was mesmerized and you ordered me not to leave the shuttle. I had no control over the situation.'

'Ten out of ten,' commented Foaly. 'Good answer. Anyway the Safetynet has a self-destruct, like everything I send into the field.'

'Quiet, civilian,' snapped the commander. But there was no venom in the LEP officer's rebuke. He was relieved; they all were. The human threat had been contained, and without the loss of a single life. They were gathered in a conference room reserved for civilian committees. Generally debriefings of this importance would be held in the Operations' Centre, but the LEP was not ready to show Artemis Fowl the nerve centre of its defences just yet.

Root jabbed an intercom button on the desk.

'Trouble, are you out there?'

'Yessir.'

'OK. Now listen, I want you to stand down the alert. Send the teams into the deep tunnels, see if we can't root out a few goblin gangs. There are still plenty of loose ends: who's organizing the B'wa Kell for one, and for what reason?'

Artemis knew he shouldn't say anything. The sooner his side of the bargain was completed, the sooner he could be in the Arctic. But the entire Paris scenario seemed suspicious.

'Does anyone else think this is too neat? It's just what you all wanted to happen. Not to mention the fact that there could be more mesmerized humans up there.'

Root did not appreciate being lectured by a Mud Boy. Especially this particular Mud Boy.

'Look, Fowl, you've done what we asked. The Paris connection has been broken off. There won't be any more illegal shipments coming down that chute, I assure you. In fact, we have doubled security on all chutes, whether they're operational or not. The important thing is that whoever is trading with the humans hasn't told them about the People. There will, of course, be a major investigation, but that's an internal problem. So don't you worry your juvenile head about it. Concentrate on growing some bristles.'

Foaly interrupted before Artemis could respond. 'About Russia,' he said, hurriedly placing his torso between Artemis and the commander. 'I've got a lead.'

'You traced the e-mail?' said Artemis, his attention switching immediately to the centaur.

'Exactly,' confirmed Foaly, launching into lecture mode.

'But it's been spiked. Untraceable.'

Foaly chuckled openly. 'Spiked? Don't make me laugh. You Mud Men and your communications systems. You're still using wires, for heaven's sake. If it's been sent, I can trace it.'

'So, where did you trace it to?'

'Every computer has a signature, as individual as a fingerprint,' continued Foaly. 'Networks too. They leave micro-traces, depending on the age of the wiring. Everything is

molecular, and if you pack gigabytes of data into a little cable, some of that cable is going to wear off.'

Butler was growing impatient. 'Listen, Foaly. Time is of the essence. Mister Fowl's life could hang in the balance. So get to the point before I start breaking things.'

The centaur's first impulse was to laugh. Surely the human was joking? Then he remembered what Butler had done to Trouble Kelp's Retrieval squad, and decided to proceed directly to the point.

'Very well, Mud Man. Keep your hair on.'

Well, almost directly to the point.

'I put the MPEG through my filters. Uranium residue points to northern Russia.'

'Now there's a shock.'

'I'm not finished,' said Foaly. 'Watch and learn.'

The centaur brought up a satellite photo of the Arctic Circle on the wall-screen. With every keystroke, the highlighted area shrank.

'Uranium means Severomorsk. Or somewhere within fifty miles. The copper wiring is from an old network. Early twentieth century, patched up over the years. The only match is Murmansk. As easy as joining the dots.'

Artemis sat forward in his chair.

'There are two hundred and eighty-four thousand landlines on that network.' Foaly had to stop for a laugh. 'Landlines. Barbarians.'

Butler cracked his knuckles loudly.

'Ah, so two hundred and eighty-four thousand landlines. I wrote a program to search for hits on our MPEG. Two possible matches. One, the Hall of Justice.'

'Not likely. The other?'

'The other line is registered to a Mikhael Vassikin on Lenin Prospekt.'

Artemis felt his stomach churn. 'And what do we know about Mikhael Vassikin?'

Foaly wiggled his fingers like a concert pianist. 'I ran a search on my own intelligence files archives. I like to keep tabs on Mud People's so-called intelligence agencies. Quite a few mentions of you by the way, Butler.'

The manservant tried to look innocent, but his facial muscles couldn't quite pull it off.

'Mikhael Vassikin is ex-KGB, now working for the Mafiya. The official term is khuligany. An enforcer. Not high level, but not street trash either. Vassikin's boss is a Murmansk known as Britva. The group's main source of income is the kidnapping of European businessmen. In the past five years they have abducted six Germans and a Swede.'

'How many were recovered alive?' asked Artemis, his voice a whisper.

Foaly consulted his statistics. 'None,' he said. 'And in two cases, the negotiators went missing. Eight million dollars in lost ransom.'

Butler struggled from a tiny fairy chair. 'Right, enough talk. I think it's time Mister Vassikin was introduced to my friend, Mister Fist.'

Melodramatic, thought Artemis. But I couldn't have put it better myself.

'Yes, old friend. Soon enough. But I have no wish to add you to the list of lost negotiators. These men are smart. So we must be smarter. We have advantages that none of our predecessors had. We know who the kidnapper is, we know where he lives and, most importantly, we have fairy magic.' Artemis glanced at Commander Root. 'We do have fairy magic, don't we?'

'You have this fairy at any rate,' replied the commander. 'I won't force any of my people

to go to Russia. But I could use some back-up.' He glanced at Holly. 'What do you think?'
'Of course I'm coming,' said Holly. 'I'm the best shuttle pilot you have.'

KOBOI LABORATORIES

There was a firing range in the Kobo Labs' basement. Opal had it constructed to her exact specifications. It incorporated her 3D projection system, was completely soundproof and was mounted on gyroscopes. You could drop an elephant from twenty metres in there and no seismograph under the world would detect so much as a shudder.

The purpose of the firing range was to give the B'wa Kell somewhere to practise with their Softnose lasers before the operation began in earnest. But it was Briar Cudgeon who had logged more hours on the simulators than anyone else. He seemed to spend every spare minute fighting virtual battles with his nemesis, Commander Julius Root.

When Opal found him, he was pumping shells from his prized Softnose Redboy into a 3D holoscreen running one of Root's old training films. It was pathetic really; a fact she didn't bother mentioning.

Cudgeon twisted out his earplugs. 'So. Who died?'

Opal handed him a video pad. 'This just came in on the spy cameras. Carrere proved as inept as usual. Everyone survived but, as you predicted, Root has called off the alert. And now the commander has agreed to personally escort the humans to northern Russia, inside the Arctic Circle.'

'I know where northern Russia is,' Cudgeon snapped. He paused, stroking his bubbled forehead thoughtfully for several moments. 'This could turn out to our advantage. Now we have the perfect opportunity to eliminate the commander. With Julius out of the way, the LEP will be like a headless stink worm. Especially with their surface communications down. Their communications are down I take it?'

'Of course,' replied Opal. 'The jammer is linked into the chute sensors. All interference with surface transmitters will be blamed on the magma flares.'

'Perfect,' said Cudgeon, his mouth twitching in what could almost be described as glee. 'I want you to disable all LEP weaponry now. No need to give Julius any advantages.'

When Kobo Laboratories had upgraded LEP weapons and transport, a tiny dot of solder had been included in each device. The solder was actually a mercury/glycerine solution that would detonate when a signal of the appropriate frequency was broadcast from the Kobo communications dish. LEP blasters would be useless, while the B'wa Kell would be armed to the teeth with Softnose lasers.

'Consider it done,' said Opal. 'Are you certain Root won't be returning? He could upset our entire plan.'

Cudgeon polished the Redboy on the leg of his uniform. 'Don't fret, my dear. Julius won't be coming back. Now that I know where he's going, I'll arrange for a little welcome party. I'm certain our scaly friends will be only too eager to oblige.'

The funny thing was that Briar Cudgeon didn't even like goblins. In fact, he detested them. They made his skin crawl with their reptilian ways. Their gas-burner breath, their lidless eyes and their constantly darting forked tongues.

But they did supply a certain something that Cudgeon needed: dumb muscle.

For centuries, the B'wa Kell triad had skulked around Haven's borders, vandalizing what they couldn't steal and fleecing any tourists stupid enough to stray off the beaten path. But they

were never really any threat to society. Whenever they got too cheeky, Commander Root would send a team into the tunnels to flush out the culprits.

One evening, a disguised Briar Cudgeon strolled into The Second Skin, a notorious B'wa Kell hang-out, plonked an attache case of gold ingots on the bar and said, 'I want to talk to the triad.'

Cudgeon was searched and blindfolded by several of the club's bouncers. When the tape came off his face, he was in a damp warehouse, walls lined with creeping moss. Three elderly goblins were seated across the table from him. He recognized them from their mugshots. Scalene, Sputa and Phlebum. The triad old guard.

The gift of gold, and the promise of more, were enough to pique their curiosity. His first utterance was carefully planned.

'Ah, Generals, I am honoured you greet me in person.'

The goblins puffed out their wrinkled old chests proudly. Generals?

The rest of Cudgeon's patter was equally smooth. He could 'help' organize the B'wa Kell, streamline it and, most importantly, arm it. Then, when the time was right, they would rise up and overthrow the Council and their lackeys, the LEP. Cudgeon promised that his first act as Governor General would be to free all the goblin prisoners in Howler's Peak. It didn't hurt that he subtly laced his speech with hints of the hypnotic mesmer.

It was an offer the goblins could not refuse. Gold, weapons, freedom for their brothers and, of course, a chance to crush the hated LEP. It never occurred to the B'wa Kell that Cudgeon could betray them just as easily as he had the LEP. They were as dumb as stink worms and twice as short-sighted.

Cudgeon met with General Scalene in a secret chamber beneath the Koboï Labs. He was in a foul mood following Luc's failure to put a scratch on any of his enemies. But there was always Plan B . . . The B'wa Kell was always eager to kill someone. It didn't really matter who.

The goblin was excited, thirsty for blood. He panted blue flames like a broken heater. 'When do we go to war, Cudgeon? Tell us when?'

The elf kept his distance. He dreamed of the day when these stupid creatures would no longer be necessary.

'Soon, General Scalene. Very soon. But first I need a favour. It concerns Commander Root.'

The goblin's yellow eyes narrowed. 'Root? The hated one. Can we kill him? Can we crack his skull and fry his brains?'

Cudgeon smiled magnanimously. 'Certainly, General. All of these things. Once Root is dead, the city will fall easily.'

The goblin was bobbing now, jiggling with excitement. 'Where is he? Where is Root?'

'I don't know,' Cudgeon admitted. 'But I know where he will be in six hours.'

'Where? Tell me, elf!'

Cudgeon heaved a large case on to the table. It contained four pairs of Koboï DoubleDex. 'Chute 93. Take these, send your best hit squad. And tell them to wrap up warm.'

CHUTE E93

Julius Root always travelled in style. In this instance, he had commandeered the Atlantean ambassador's shuttle. All leather and gold. Seats softer than a gnome's behind, and drag buffers that negated all but the most serious jolts. Needless to say, the Atlantean

ambassador hadn't been all that thrilled about handing over the starter chip. But it was difficult to refuse the commander when his fingers were drumming a tattoo on the tri-barrelled blaster strapped to his hip. So now the humans and their two elfin chaperones were climbing E93 in some considerable comfort.

Artemis helped himself to a still water from the chiller cabinet. 'This tastes unusual,' he commented. 'Not unpleasant, but different.'

'Clean is the word you're searching for,' said Holly. 'You wouldn't believe how many filters we have to put it through to purge the Mud People from it.'

'No bickering, Captain Short,' warned Root. 'We're on the same side now. I want a smooth mission. Now suit up, all of you. We won't last five minutes out there without protection.'

Holly cracked open an overhead locker. 'Fowl, front and centre.'

Artemis complied, a bemused smile twitching at his lips.

Holly pulled several cubic packages from the locker. 'What are you, about a six?'

Artemis shrugged. He wasn't familiar with the People's system of measurement.

'What? Artemis Fowl doesn't know? I thought you were the world's expert on the People. It was you who stole our Book last year, wasn't it?'

Artemis unwrapped the package. It was a suit of some ultra-light rubber polymer.

'Anti-radiation,' explained Holly. 'Your cells will thank me in fifty years, if you're still around.'

Artemis pulled the suit over his clothes. It shrank to fit like a second skin. 'Clever material.'

'Memory latex. Moulds itself to your shape, within reason. One use only unfortunately. Wear it and recycle it.'

Butler clinked over. He was carrying so much fairy weaponry that Foaly had supplied him with a Moonbelt. The belt reduced the effective weight of its attachments to one fifth of the Earth norm.

'What about me?' asked Butler, nodding at the rad suits.

Holly frowned. 'We don't have anything that big. Latex can only go so far.'

'Forget it. I've been in Russia before. It didn't kill me.'

'Not yet it hasn't. Give it time.'

Butler shrugged. 'What choice do I have?'

Holly smiled, and there was a nasty twist to it. 'Oh, I didn't say there wasn't a choice.'

She reached into the locker, pulling out a large pump 'n' spray can. And, for some reason, that little can scared Butler more than a bunker full of missiles.

'Now, hold still,' she said, aiming a gramophone-type nozzle at the bodyguard. 'This may stink worse than a hermit dwarf, but at least your skin won't glow in the dark.'

CHAPTER 8: TO RUSSIA WITH GLOVES

LENIN PROSPEKT, MIRMANSK

MIKHAEL Vassikin was growing impatient. For over two years now he'd been on babysitting duty. At Britva's request. Not that it had actually been a request. The term request implied that you had a choice in the matter. You did not argue with Britva. You did not even protest quietly. The Menidzher, or manager, was from the old school where his word was law.

Britva's instructions had been simple: feed him, wash him and, if he doesn't come out of the coma in another year, kill him and dump the body in the Kola.

Two weeks before the deadline, the Irishman had bolted upright in his bed. He awoke screaming a name. That name was Angeline. Kamar got such a shock, he'd dropped the bottle of wine he'd been opening. The bottle smashed, piercing his Ferruci loafers and cracking a big toenail. Toenails grow back, but Ferruci loafers were hard to come by in the Arctic Circle. Mikhael had been forced to sit on his partner to stop him killing the hostage.

So now they were playing the waiting game. Kidnapping was an established business and there were rules. First you sent the teaser note, or in this case the e-mail. Wait a few days to give the pigeon a chance to put some funds together, then hit him with the ransom demand.

They were locked in Mikhael's apartment on Lenin Prospekt, waiting for the call from Britva. They didn't even dare to go out for air. Not that there was much to see. Murmansk was one of those Russian cities that had been poured directly from a concrete mould. The only time Lenin Prospekt looked good was when it was buried in snow.

Kamar emerged from the bedroom. His sharp features were stretched in disbelief. 'He wants caviar, can you believe it? I give him a nice bowl of stroganina and he wants caviar, the ungrateful Irlanskii.'

Mikhael rolled his eyes. 'I liked him better asleep.'

Kamar nodded, spitting into the fireplace. 'The sheets are too rough, he says. He's lucky I don't wrap him in a sack and roll him into the bay --'

The phone rang, interrupting his empty threats.

'This is it, my friend,' Vassikin said, clapping Kamar on the shoulder. 'We are on our way.'

Vassikin picked up the phone. 'Yes?'

'It's me,' said a voice, made tinny by old wiring.

'Mister Brit -'

'Shut up, idiot! Never use my name!'

Mikhael swallowed. The Menidzher didn't like to be connected to his various businesses. That meant no paperwork and no mention of his name if it could be recorded. It was his custom to make calls while driving around the city so that his location could not be triangulated.

'I'm sorry, boss.'

'You should be,' continued the Mafiya kingpin. 'Now listen, and don't talk. You have nothing to contribute.'

Vassikin covered the handset. 'Everything's fine,' he whispered, giving Kamar the thumbs up. 'We're doing a great job.'

'The Fowls are a clever outfit,' continued Britva. 'And I have no doubt they are concentrating on tracing the last e-mail.'

'But I spiked the last -'

'What did I tell you?'

'You said not to talk, Mister Brit . . . sir.'

'That's right. So send the ransom message and then move Fowl to the drop point.'

Mikhael paled. 'The drop point?'

'Yes, the drop point. No one will be looking for you there, I guarantee it.'

'But -'

'Again with the talking! Get yourself a spine, man. It's only for a couple of days. So, you might lose a year off your life. It won't kill you.'

Vassikin's brain churned, searching for an excuse. Nothing came.

'OK, boss. Whatever you say.'

'That's right. Now listen to me. This is your big chance. Do this right and you move up a couple of steps in the organization.'

Vassikin grinned. A life of champagne and expensive cars beckoned.

'If this man really is young Fowl's father, the boy will pay up. When you get the money, dump them both in the Kola. I don't want any survivors to start a vendetta. Call me if there's any trouble.'

'OK, boss.'

'Oh, and one more thing.'

'Yes?'

'Don't call me.'

The line went dead. Vassikin was left staring at the handset as though it were a handful of plague virus.

'Well?' asked Kamar.

'We are to send the second message.'

A broad grin split Kamar's face. 'Excellent. At last this thing is nearly over.'

'Then we are to move the package to the drop zone.'

The broad grin disappeared like a fox down a hole. 'What? Now?'

'Yes. Now.'

Kamar paced the tiny living room. 'That is crazy. Completely insane. Fowl cannot be here for a couple of days at the earliest. There's no need for us to spend two days breathing in that poison. What is the reasoning?'

Mikhael extended the phone. 'You tell him. I'm sure the *Menidzher* will appreciate being told he is a madman.'

Kamar sank on to the threadbare sofa, dropping his head into his hands. 'Will this thing never end?'

His partner fired up their ancient sixteen-megabyte hard drive. 'I don't know for certain,' he said, sending the pre-prepared message. 'But I do know what will happen if we don't do what Britva says.'

Kamar sighed. 'I think I'll go shout at the prisoner for a while.'

'Will that help?'

'It won't,' admitted Kamar. 'But it will make me feel better.'

E93, ARCTIC SHUTTLE PORT

The Arctic Station had never been high on the fairy tourist list. Sure, icebergs and polar bears were pretty, but nothing was worth saturating your lungs with irradiated air for.

Holly docked the shuttle in the only serviceable bay. The terminal itself resembled nothing more than a deserted warehouse. Static conveyer belts snaked along the floor and low-level heating pipes rattled with insect life.

Holly handed out human overcoats and gloves from an ancient locker.

'Wrap up, Mud Boys. It's cold outside.'

Artemis did not need to be told. The terminal's solar batteries had long since shut down, and the ice's grip had cracked the walls like a nut in a vice.

Holly tossed Butler his coat from a distance. 'You know something, Butler? You stink!' she said, laughing.

The manservant growled. 'You and your radiation gel. I think my skin's changed colour.'

'Don't worry about it. Fifty years and it'll wash right off:

Butler buttoned a Cossack greatcoat up to his neck. 'I don't know why you're getting all wrapped up. You've got the fancy suits.'

'The coats are camouflage,' explained Holly, smearing rad gel on her face and neck. 'If we shield, the vibration makes the suits useless. Might as well dip your bones in a reactor core. So for tonight only, we're all humans.'

Artemis frowned. If the fairies couldn't shield, it would make rescuing his father all the more difficult. His evolving plan would have to be adjusted.

'Less of the chat,' growled Root, pulling a bearskin hat over his pointed ears. 'We move out in five. I want everybody armed and dangerous. Even you, Fowl, if your little wrists can support a weapon.'

Artemis selected a fairy handgun from the shuttle's arsenal. He jacked the battery into its slot, flicking the setting up to three.

'Don't worry about me, Commander. I've been practising. We have quite a stash of LEP weaponry at the manor.'

Root's complexion cranked up one more notch. 'Well, there's a big difference between stunning a cardboard cutout and a real person.'

Artemis gave his vampire smile. 'If everything proceeds according to plan, there will be no need for weapons. The first stage is simplicity itself: we set up a surveillance post near Vassikin's apartment. When the opportunity arises, Butler will snatch our Russian friend and the five of us can have a little chat. I'm sure that he will tell us everything we need to know under the influence of your mesmer. Then, it will be a simple matter to stun any guards and rescue my father.'

Root pulled a heavy scarf over his mouth. 'And what if things don't go according to plan?'

Artemis's eyes were cold and determined. 'Then, Commander, we will have to improvise.'

Holly felt a shiver rattle around her stomach. And it had nothing to do with the climate.

*

The terminal was buried twenty metres below an ice pack. They took the courtesy elevator to the surface, and the party emerged into the Arctic night looking for all the world like an adult and three children. Albeit three children with inhuman weaponry clanking under every loose fold of cloth.

Holly checked the GPS locator on her wrist. 'We're in the Rosta district, Commander. Twenty clicks north of Murmansk.'

'What's Foaly got on the weather? I don't want to be caught in the middle of a blizzard miles from our destination.'

'No luck. I can't get a line. Magma flares must still be up'

'D'Arvit!' swore Root. 'Well, I suppose we'll have to take our chances on foot. Butler, you're the expert here, you take point. Captain Short, bring up the rear. Feel free to boot any human backside if it lags behind.'

Holly winked at Artemis. 'No need to tell me twice, sir.'

'I'll bet there isn't,' grunted Root, with only the barest hint of a smile playing about his lips.

The motley band trudged south-east by moonlight until they reached the railway line. Walking along the sleepers was the one place they could be safe from drifts and suck holes. Progress was slow. A northerly wind snaked through every pore in their clothing, and the cold attacked any exposed skin like a million electric darts.

There was little conversation. The Arctic had that effect on people, even if three of them were wearing coil-heated suits.

Holly broke the silence. Something had been nagging at her for a while. 'Tell me something, Fowl,' she said from behind him. 'Your father. Is he like you?'

Artemis's step faltered for an instant. 'That's a strange question. Why do you ask?'

'Well, you're no friend to the People. What if the man we're trying to rescue is the man who will destroy us?'

There was a long silence, broken only by the chattering of teeth. Holly saw Artemis's chin drop on to his chest.

'You have no cause to be alarmed, Captain. My father, though some of his ventures were undoubtedly illegal, was . . . is . . . a noble man. The idea of harming another creature would be repugnant to him.'

Holly tugged her boot from twenty centimetres of snow. 'So, what happened to you?'

Artemis's breath came over his shoulder in icy sheets. 'I . . . I made a mistake.'

Holly squinted at the back of the human's head. Was this actual sincerity from Artemis Fowl? It was hard to believe. Even more surprising was the fact that she didn't know how to react. Whether to extend the hand of forgiveness, or the boot of retribution. Eventually, she decided to reserve judgement. For the moment.

They passed into a ravine, worn smooth by the whistling wind. Butler didn't like it. His soldier's sense was beating a tattoo on the inside of his skull. He raised a clenched fist.

Root double-timed until he caught up.

'Trouble?'

Butler squinted into the snow field, searching for footprints. 'Maybe. Nice spot for a surprise attack.'

'Maybe. If anyone knew we were coming.'

'Is that possible? Could someone know?'

Root snorted, breath forming clouds in the air before him. 'Impossible. The chute is totally isolated, and LEP security is the tightest on the planet.'

And that was when the goblin hit squad soared over the ridge.

Butler grabbed Artemis by the collar, unceremoniously flinging him into a drift. His other hand was already drawing his weapon.

'Keep your head down, Artemis. Time for me to earn my salary.'

Artemis would have responded testily had his head not been under a metre of snow.

There were four goblins flying in loose formation, dark against the starlit sky. They quickly rose to three hundred metres, making no attempt to conceal their presence. They neither attacked nor fled, simply hovered overhead.

'Goblins,' grunted Root, pulling a Far shoot neutrino rifle into his shoulder. 'Too stupid to live. All they had to do was pick us off.'

Butler picked a spot, spreading his legs for steadiness. 'Do we wait until we see the whites of their eyes, Commander?'

'Goblin eyes don't have whites,' responded Root. 'But even so, holster your weapon. Captain Short and I will stun them. No need for anyone to die.'

Butler slid the Sig Sauer into its pouch beneath his arm. It was next to useless at that range anyway. It would be interesting to see howr Holly and Root handled themselves in a firefight. After all, Artemis's life was pretty much in their hands. Not to mention his own.

Butler glanced sideways. Holly and the commander were pumping the triggers of various weapons. Without any result. Their weapons were as dead as mice in a snake pit.

'I don't understand it,' muttered Root. 'I checked these myself.'

Artemis, naturally, was first to figure it out. He shook the snow from his hair.

'Sabotage,' he proclaimed, tossing aside the useless fairy handgun. 'There is no other alternative. This is why the B'wa Kell needs Softnose weapons, because it has somehow disabled fairy lasers.'

But the commander was not listening, and neither was Butler. This was no time for clever deductions; this was a time for action. They were sitting ducks out here, dark against the pale Arctic glow. This theory was confirmed when several Softnose laser bursts bored hissing holes in the snow at their feet.

Holly activated her helmet Optix, zooming in on the enemy.

'It looks like one of them has a Softnose laser, sir. Something with a long barrel.'

'We need cover. Fast!'

Butler nodded. 'Look. An overhang. Under the ridge.'

The manservant grabbed his charge by the collar, hoisting him aloft as easily as a child would lift a kitten. They struggled through the snow to the shelter of the overhang. Maybe a million years ago the ice had melted sufficiently for a layer to slump slightly, then freeze up again. The resulting wrinkle had somehow lasted through the ages and could now possibly save their lives.

They dived underneath the lip, wriggling backwards against a wall of ice. The frozen canopy was easily thick enough to withstand gunfire from any conventional weapon.

Butler shielded Artemis with his body, risking an upward glance.

'Too far. I can't make them out. Holly?'

Captain Short poked her head from under the frozen ledge and her Optix zoomed into focus.

'Well, what are they up to?'

Holly waited a beat, until the figures sharpened.

'Funny thing,' she commented. 'They're all firing now, but . . .'

'But what, Captain?'

Holly tapped her helmet to make sure the lenses were working. 'Maybe I'm getting some Optix distortion, sir, but it looks like they're missing on purpose, shooting way over our heads.'

Butler felt the blood pounding in his brain. 'It's a trap!' he roared, reaching behind him to grab Artemis. 'Everybody out! Everybody out!'

And that was when the goblin charges sent fifty tonnes of rock, ice and snow tumbling to the ground.

They nearly made it. Of course, nearly never won a bucket of squid at gnommish roulette.

If it hadn't been for Butler, not one of the group would have survived. Something happened to him. An inexplicable surge of strength, not unlike the energy bursts that allow mothers to lift fallen trees off their children. The manservant grabbed Artemis and Holly, spinning them forward like stones across a pond. It wasn't a very dignified way to travel, but it certainly beat having your bones pulverized by falling ice. For the second time in so many minutes, Artemis landed nose first in a snowdrift. Behind him, Butler and Root were scrabbling from beneath the ledge, boots slipping on the icy surface. The air was rent by avalanche thunder, and the pack ice beneath them heaved and split. Thick chunks of rock and ice speared the cave's opening like bars. Butler and Root were trapped.

Holly was on her feet, racing towards her commander. But what could she do? Throw herself back underneath the ledge?

'Stay back, Captain,' said Root into his helmet mike. 'That's an order!'

'Commander,' Holly breathed. 'You're alive.'

'Somehow,' came the reply. 'Butler is unconscious and we're pinned down. The ledge is on the point of collapsing. The only thing holding it up is the debris. If we brush that aside to get out . . .'

They were alive then at least. Trapped, but alive. A plan, they needed a plan.

Holly found herself strangely calm. This was one of the qualities that made her such an excellent field agent. In times of excessive stress, Captain Short had the ability to target a course of action. Often the only viable course. In the combat simulator for her captain's exam, Holly had defeated insurmountable virtual enemies by blasting the projector. Technically, she had defeated all her enemies, so the panel had to pass her.

Holly spoke into her helmet mike. 'Commander, undo Butler's Moonbelt and strap yourselves on. I'm going to haul you both out of there.'

'Roger, Holly. Do you need a piton?'

'If you can get one out to me.'

'Standby.'

A piton dart jetted through a gap in the icy bars, landing a metre from Holly's boots. The dart trailed a length of fine-grade cord.

Holly snapped the piton into the cord receptacle on her own belt, making sure there were no kinks in the line. Meanwhile, Artemis had dragged himself from the drift.

'This plan is patently ridiculous,' he said, brushing the snow from his sleeves. 'You cannot hope to drag their combined weight with sufficient velocity to break the icicles and avoid being crushed.'

'I'm not going to drag them,' snapped Holly.

'Well then, who is?'

Captain Short pointed down the track. There was a green train winding its way towards them.

'That is,' she said.

There were three goblins left. Their names were D'Nall, Aymon and Nyle. Three rookies vying for the recently vacated lieutenant's spot. Lieutenant Poll had handed in his resignation when he'd strayed too close to the avalanche and been swatted by a five-hundred-kilo pane of transparent ice.

They hovered at three hundred metres, well out of range. Of course, they weren't out of fairy-weapon range, but LEP weapons weren't operational at the moment. Kobo Laboratories' upgrades had seen to that.

'That was some hole in Lieutenant Poll,' whistled Aymon. 'I could see right through 'im. An' I don't mean that like he was a bad liar.'

Goblins didn't get too attached to each other. Considering the amount of backstabbing, backbiting and general vindictiveness that went on in the B'wa Kell, it didn't pay to make any special friends.

'What you think?' asked D'Nall, the handsome one, relatively speaking. 'Maybe one of you guys should take a spin down there.'

Aymon snorted. 'Sure thing. We go down and get sparked by the big one. Just how dumb do you think we are?'

'The big one is out of the picture. I sparked him myself. Sweet shot.'

'My shot set off the avalanche,' objected Nyle, the baby of the gang. 'You're always claimin' my kills.'

'What kills? The only thing you ever killed was a stink worm. And that was an accident.'

'Rubbish,' sulked Nyle. 'I meant to kill that worm. He was buggin' me.'

Aymon swooped between the two. 'All right. Keep your scales on, the pair of you. All we gotta do is throw a few rounds into the survivors from up here.'

'Nice plan, genius,' sneered D'Nall. 'Except it won't work.'

'And why not?'

D'Nall pointed below with a manicured nail. 'Because they're boarding that train.'

Four green carriages were winding in from the north, dragged along by an ancient diesel engine. A maelstrom of snow flurries coiled in its wake.

Salvation, thought Holly. Or perhaps not. For some reason, the mere sight of the clanking locomotive set her stomach bubbling with acid. Still, she was in no position to be choosy.

'It's the Mayak Chemical train,' said Artemis.

Holly glanced over her shoulder. Artemis seemed even paler than usual. 'The what?'

'Environmentalists worldwide call it the Green Machine, something of an irony. It transports spent uranium and plutonium assemblies to the Mayak Chemical Combine for recycling. One driver locked up in the engine. No guards. Fully loaded, this thing is hotter than a nuclear submarine.'

'And you know about this because

Artemis shrugged. 'I like to keep track of these things. After all, radiation is the world's problem.'

Holly could feel it now. Uranium tendrils eating through the rad gel on her cheeks. That train was poison. But it was her only chance of getting the commander out alive.

'This just keeps getting better and better,' Holly muttered.

The train was closer. Obviously. Motoring along at about ten clicks an hour. No problem for Holly on her own, but with two men down and one next-to-useless Mud Boy, it was going to take quite a feat to get on board that locomotive.

Holly spared a second to check on the goblins. They were holding steady at three hundred metres. Goblins were no good at improvisation. This train was unexpected; it would take them at least a minute to work out a new strategy. The big hole in their fallen comrade might give them further pause for thought.

Holly could feel the radiation emanating from the carriages, burning through the tiniest gap in the radiation gel, prickling her eyeballs. It was only a matter of time before her magic ran out. After that, she was living on borrowed time.

No time to think about it now. Her priority was the commander. She had to get him out of

there alive. If the B'wa Kell was brazen enough to mount an operation against the LEP, there was obviously something pretty big going on below ground. Whatever it was, Julius Root would be needed to spearhead the counterattack. She turned towards Artemis.

'OK, Mud Boy. We've got one shot at this. Grab on to whatever you can.'

Artemis couldn't hide an apprehensive shiver.

'Don't be afraid, Artemis. You can make it.'

Artemis bristled. 'It's cold, fairy. Humans shiver in the cold.'

'That's the spirit,' said the LEP captain, and she began to run. The piton wire played out behind her like a harpoon cable. Though it had the approximate grade of fishing line, the cable could easily suspend two struggling elephants. Artemis raced after her as fast as his loafered feet could manage.

They ran parallel to the tracks, feet crunching through the snow. Behind them the train grew closer, pushing a buffer of air before it.

Artemis struggled to keep up. This was not for him. Running and sweating. Combat, for heaven's sake. He was no soldier. He was a planner. A mastermind. The hurly-burly of actual conflict was best left to Butler and people like him. But his manservant wasn't there to take care of the physical tasks this time. And he never would be again if they didn't manage to board this train.

Artemis's breath came short, crystallizing in front of his face, blurring his vision. The train had drawn level now, steel wheels spewing ice and sparks into the air.

'Second carriage,' panted Holly. 'There's a runner. Mind your footing.'

Runner? Artemis glanced behind. The second carriage was coming up fast. But the noise was blurring his vision. Was that possible? It was terrific. Unbearable. There, below the steel doors. A narrow board. Wide enough to stand on. Barely.

Holly alighted easily, flattening herself against the carriage wall. She made it look so effortless. A simple skip and she was safe from the grab of those pulverizing wheels.

'Come on, Fowl,' shouted Holly. 'Jump.'

Artemis tried, he really did. But the toe of his loafer snagged on a sleeper. He stumbled forward, pin-wheeling for balance. A painful death came rushing up to meet him.

Two left feet,' muttered Holly, grabbing her least favourite Mud Boy by the collar. Momentum swung Artemis forward, slamming him into the door like something out of a cartoon.

The piton cord was slapping against the carriage. Only seconds left before Holly departed from the train as quickly as she'd arrived. The LEP captain searched for a strongpoint to anchor herself. Root and Butler's weight may have been reduced by the Moonbelt, but the jerk when it came, would be more than sufficient to drag her from the locomotive. And if that happened, it was all over.

Holly hooked one arm through a rung on the carriage's external ladder. She noticed magical sparks playing over a rip in her suit. They were counteracting the radiation damage. How much longer could her magic last under these conditions? Constant healing really took it out of a girl. She needed to complete the power-restoring Ritual. And the sooner the better.

Holly was about to unclip the cable and attach it to one of the rungs when it snapped taut, pulling Holly's legs from beneath her. She held on to the rung grimly, fingernails digging into her own skin. On reflection, this plan needed a bit of work. Time seemed to stretch, elastic as the cord and, for a moment, Holly thought her elbow would pop right out of its socket. Then the ice gave and Root and Butler were twanged out of their icy tomb like a bolt from a crossbow.

Seconds later, they slapped against the side of the train, their reduced weight keeping

them aloft, for now. But it was only a matter of time before what little gravity they had pushed them under the steel wheels.

Artemis latched on to the rung beside her. 'What can I do?'

She nodded at a shoulder pocket. 'In there. A small vial. Take it out.'

Artemis ripped open the Velcro flap, pulling out a tiny spray bottle. 'OK. Got it.'

'Good. It's up to you now, Fowl. Up and over.'

Artemis's mouth dropped open. 'Up and . . .?'

'Yes. It's our only hope. We have to get this door open to reel in Butler and the commander. There's a bend in the track two clicks away. If this train slows down even one revolution, they're gone.'

Artemis nodded. 'The vial?'

'Acid. For the lock. The mechanism's on the inside. Cover your face and squeeze. Give it the whole tube. Don't get any on you.'

It was a long conversation under the circumstances. Especially since every second was vital. Artemis did not waste another one on goodbyes.

He dragged himself to the next rung, keeping the length of his body pressed close to the carriage. The wind was whipping along the length of the train, tiny motes of ice in every gust. They stung like bees. Nevertheless, Artemis pulled off his gloves with chattering teeth. Better frostbite than being crushed beneath the wheels.

Upwards. One rung at a time, until his head poked above the carriage. Every shred of shelter was now gone. The air pounded his forehead, forcing itself down his throat. Artemis squinted through the blizzard, along the carriage's roof. There! In the centre. A skylight. Across a desert of steel, blasted smooth as glass by the elements. Not a handhold within five metres. The strength of a rhino would be of no use here, Artemis decided. At last an opportunity to use his brain. Kinetics and momentum. Simple enough, in theory.

Keeping to the front rim of the carriage, Artemis inched on to the roof. The wind wormed beneath his legs, raising them five centimetres from the deck, threatening to float him off the train.

Artemis curled his fingers around the rim. These were not gripping fingers. Artemis hadn't gripped anything bigger than his mobile phone in several months. If you wanted someone to type Paradise Lost in under twenty minutes, then Artemis was your man. But as for hanging on to carriage roofs in a blizzard. Dead loss. Which, fortunately, was all part of the plan.

A millisecond before his finger joints parted company, Artemis let go. The slipstream shot him straight through the skylight's metal housing.

Perfect, he would have grunted, had there been a cubic centimetre of air in his lungs. But even if he had said it, the wind would have snatched away any words before his own ears heard them. He had moments now before the wind dug its fingers beneath his torso, flipping him on to the icy steppes. Cannon fodder for the goblins.

Artemis fumbled the acid vial from his pocket, snapping the top between his teeth. A fleck of the acid flew past his eye. No time to worry about that now. No time for anything.

The skylight was secured by a thick padlock. Artemis dribbled two drops into the keyhole. All he could spare. It would have to be enough.

The effect was immediate. The acid ate through the metal like lava through ice. Fairy technology. Best under -the world.

The padlock pinged open, exposing the hatch to the wind's power. It flipped upwards and Artemis tumbled through on to a pallet of barrels. Not exactly the picture of a gallant rescuer.

The train's motion shook him from the cargo. Artemis landed face up, gazing at the triple-triangled symbol for radiation stamped on the side of each container. At least the barrels were sealed, though rust seemed to have taken hold on quite a few.

Artemis rolled across the slatted floor, clambering to his knees alongside the door. Was Captain Short still anchored there, or was he alone now? For the first time in his life. Truly alone.

'Fowl! Open the door, you pasty-faced Mud Weasel!'

Ah well. Not alone then.

Covering his face with a forearm, Artemis drenched the carriage's triple bolt with fairy acid. The steel lock melted instantly, dripping to the floor like a stream of mercury. Artemis dragged the sliding door back.

Holly was hanging on grimly, her face steaming where radiation was eating through the gel.

Artemis grabbed her waistband. 'On three?'

Holly nodded. No more energy for speech.

Artemis flexed his digits. Fingers, don't fail me now. If he ever got out of this, he would buy one of those ridiculous home gymnasiums advertised on the shopping channels.

'One.'

The bend was coming. He could see it out of the corner of his eye. The train would slow down or derail itself.

'Two.'

Captain Short's strength was almost spent. The wind rippled her frame like a windsock.

'Three!'

Artemis pulled with all the strength in his thin arms. Holly closed her eyes and let go, unable to believe she was trusting her life to this Mud Boy.

Artemis knew a little something about physics. He timed his count to take advantage of swing, momentum and the train's own forward motion. But nature always throws something into the mix that can't be anticipated. In this case the something was a slight gap between two sections of the track. Not enough to derail a locomotive, but certainly enough to cause a bump.

This bump sent the carriage door crashing into its frame like a five-tonne guillotine. But it looked like Holly had made it. Artemis couldn't really tell because she had crashed into him, sending them both careering into the wooden siding. She seemed to be intact, from what he could see. At least her head was still attached to her neck, which was good. But she did seem to be unconscious. Probably trauma.

Artemis knew that he was going to pass out too. He could tell by the darkness eating at the corners of his vision, like some malignant computer virus. He slipped sideways, landing on Holly's chest.

This had more severe repercussions than you might think. Because Holly was unconscious, her magic was on autopilot. And unsupervised magic flows like electricity. Artemis's face made contact with the fairy's left hand, diverting the flow of blue sparks. And while this was good for him, it was most definitely bad for her. Because although Artemis didn't know it, Holly needed every spark of magic she could muster -- not all of her had made it inside the train.

Commander Root had just activated his piton cord winch when he received a most unexpected poke in the eye.

The goblin D'Nall removed a small rectangular mirror from his tunic and checked his

scales were smooth.

'These Koboi wings are great. You think we'll be allowed to keep 'em?'

Aymon scowled. Not that you'd notice. Goblin lizard ancestry meant that facial movement was pretty limited. 'Quiet, you hot-blooded fool!'

Hot-blooded. That was a pretty serious insult for one of the B'waKell.

D'Nall bristled. 'Be careful, friend, or I'll tear that forked tongue right out of your head.'

'We won't have a tongue between us if those elves escape!' retorted Aymon.

It was true. The generals did not take disappointment well.

'So what do we do? I got the looks in this outfit. That must make you the brains.'

'We shoot at the train,' interjected Nyle. 'Simple.'

D'Nall adjusted his Koboi DoubleDex, hovering across to the squad's junior member.

'Idiot,' he snapped, administering a swift slap to the head. 'That thing is radioactive, can't you smell it? One stray burst and we'll all be ash floating on the breeze.'

'Good point,' admitted Nyle. 'You're not as stupid as you look.'

'Thank you.'

'Welcome.'

Aymon throttled down, descending to a hundred and fifty metres. It was so tempting. One tightly focused burst to take out the elf clinging to the carriage, another to dispatch the human on the roof. But he couldn't risk it. One degree off target and he'd sucked his last stink-worm spaghetti.

'OK,' he announced into his helmet mike. 'Here's the plan. With all the radiation in that carriage, chances are the targets will be dead in minutes. We follow the train for a while just to make sure. Then we go back and tell the general we saw the bodies.'

D'Nall buzzed down beside him. 'And do we see the bodies?'

Aymon groaned. 'Of course not, you fool! Do you want your eyeballs to dry up and fall out?'

'Duh;

'Exactly. So are we clear?'

'Crystal,' said Nyle, drawing his Softnose Redboy handgun. He shot his comrades from behind. Close range, point blank. They never had a chance. He followed their bodies to Earth on full magnification. The snow would cover them in minutes. Nobody would be stumbling over those particular corpses until the polar caps melted.

Nyle bolstered his weapon, punching in the coordinates for the shuttle terminal on his flight computer. If you studied his reptilian face carefully, it was just possible to make out a grin. There was a new lieutenant in town.

CHAPTER 9: NO SAFE HAVEN

OPERATIONS' BOOTH, POLICE PLAZA

FOALY was sitting in front of the LEP mainframe waiting for the results of his latest search. Extensive laser brushing of the goblin shuttle had revealed one complete and one partial thumbprint. The complete print was his own. Easily explicable as Foaly personally inspected all retired shuttle parts. The partial print could well belong to their traitor. Not enough to identify the fairy who'd been running LEP technology to the B'wa Kell, but certainly enough to eliminate the innocent. Cross-reference the remaining names with everybody who had shuttle-part access, and the list got considerably shorter. Foaly switched his tail contentedly. Genius. No point in being humble about it.

At the moment, the computer was crunching through personnel files with the partial print. All Foaly could do was twiddle his thumbs and wait for contact with the surface team. The magma flares were still up. Very unusual. Unusual and coincidental.

Foaly's suspicious train of thought was interrupted by a familiar voice.

'Search complete,' said the computer, in Foaly's own tones. A little vanity. 'Three hundred and forty-six eliminated. Forty possibles remaining.'

Forty. Not bad. They could easily be interviewed. An opportunity to use the Retimager once again. But there was another way to narrow the field.

'Computer. Cross-reference possibles with Level Three clearance personnel.' Level Three clearance would include everybody with access to the recycling smelters.

'Referencing.'

Of course, the computer would only accept commands from fairies whose voice patterns it was programmed to recognize. And as a further security precaution, Foaly had coded his personal log and other important files in a computer language he'd based on the ancient tongue of the centaurs: Centaurian.

All centaurs were a touch paranoid, and with good reason, since there were less than a hundred left. The humans had managed to kill off their cousins, the unicorns, altogether. There were probably six centaurs under the Earth who could read the language, and only one who could decipher the computer dialect.

Centaurian was possibly the oldest form of writing, dating back over ten millennia to when humans first began hunting fairies. The opening paragraph of The Scrolls of Capalla, the only surviving illuminated Centaurian manuscript, read:

Fairy creatures, heed this warning,
On Earth, the human era is dawning.
So hide, fairy, lest you be found,
And make a home beneath the ground.

Centaurus were known for their intellect, not their poetry. Still, Foaly felt the words were as relevant today as they had been all those centuries ago.

Cudgeon knocked on the booth's security glass. Now, technically, Cudgeon shouldn't be allowed in Ops, but Foaly buzzed him through. He could never resist having a crack at the ex-commander. Cudgeon had been demoted to lieutenant following a disastrous attempt to replace Root as Recon head honcho. If it hadn't been for his family's considerable political clout, he would have been booted off the force altogether. All in all, he might have been better off in some other line of work. At least he wouldn't have had to suffer Foaly's constant teasing.

'I have some e-forms for you to initial,' said the lieutenant, avoiding eye-contact.

'No problem, Commander,' chuckled the centaur. 'How's the plotting going? Any revolutions planned for this afternoon?'

'Just sign the forms please,' said Cudgeon holding out a digi-pen. His hand was shaking. Amazing, thought Foaly. This broken-down shell of an elf was once on the LEP fast track.

'No, but seriously, Cudgeon. You're doing a bang-up job on the form-signing thing.'

Cudgeon's eyes narrowed in suspicion. 'Thank you, sir.'

A grin tugged at the corner of Foaly's mouth. 'You're welcome. No need to get a swelled head.'

Cudgeon's hand flew to his misshapen forehead. Still a touch of the old vanity left.

'Oops. Sore subject. Sorry about that.'

There was a spark in the corner of Cudgeon's eye. A spark that should have warned Foaly. But he was distracted by a beep from the computer.

'List complete.'

'Excuse me for a moment, Commander. Important business. Computer stuff, you wouldn't understand it.'

Foaly turned to the plasma screen. The lieutenant would just have to wait for his signature. It was probably just an order for shuttle parts anyway.

The penny dropped. A big penny with a clang louder than a dwarf's underpants hitting a wall. Shuttle parts. An inside job. Someone with a grudge to settle. A line of sweat filled each groove on Foaly's forehead. It was so obvious.

He looked at the plasma screen for confirmation of what he already knew. There were only two names. The first, Bom Arbles, could be eliminated immediately. The Retrieval officer had been killed in a core-diving accident. The second name pulsed gently. Lieutenant Briar Cudgeon. Demoted to recycling crew around the time Holly retired that starboard booster. It all made sense.

Foaly knew that if he didn't acknowledge the message in ten seconds, the computer would read the name aloud. He casually punched the delete button.

'You know, Briar,' he croaked. 'All those jibes about your head problem. It's all in fun. My way of being sympathetic. Actually, I have some ointment . . .'

Something cold and metallic pressed against the back of the centaur's head. Foaly had seen too many rock 'em sock 'em movies not to know what it was.

'Save your ointment, donkey boy,' said Cudgeon's voice in his ear. 'I have a feeling you'll be developing some head problems of your own.'

THE MAYAK CHEMICAL TRAIN, NORTHERN RUSSIA

The first thing Artemis felt was a rhythmical knocking, jarring along the length of his spine. I'm at the spa in Blackrock, he thought. Irina is massaging my back. Just what my system needs, especially after all that horseplay on the train . . . The train!

Obviously they were still aboard the Mayak train. The jerking motion was actually the carriage jolting over the track joins. Artemis forced his eyes open, expecting gargantuan doses of stiffness and pain. But instead he realized he felt fine. More than fine. Great in fact. It must be magic. Holly must have healed his various cuts and bruises while he was unconscious.

Nobody else was feeling quite so chipper. Especially Captain Short, who was still unconscious. Root was draping a large coat over his fallen officer.

'Oh, you're awake, are you?' he said, without so much as a glance at Artemis. 'I don't know how you can sleep at all after what you've just done.'

'Done? But I saved you . . . at least, I helped.'

'You helped all right, Fowl. You helped yourself to the last of Holly's magic while she was unconscious.'

Artemis groaned. It must have happened when they fell. Somehow her magic had been diverted. 'I see what must have happened. It was an . . .'

Root raised a warning finger. 'Don't say it. The great Artemis Fowl doesn't do anything by accident.'

Artemis fought against the train's motion, climbing to his knees. 'It can't be anything serious. Just exhaustion, surely?'

And suddenly Root's face was a centimetre from his own, his complexion rosy enough to generate heat. 'Nothing serious!' spluttered the commander, barely able to get the words out in his rage. 'Nothing serious! She lost her trigger finger! The door cut it clean off. Her career is over. And because of you, Holly barely had enough magic to stop the bleeding. She's drained of power now. Empty.'

'She lost a finger?' echoed Artemis numbly.

'Not lost exactly,' said the commander, waving the severed digit. 'It poked me in the eye on the way past.' His eye was already beginning to blacken.

'If we go back now, surely your surgeons can graft it on?'

Root shook his head. 'If we could go back now. I have a feeling that the situation below ground is a lot different from when we left. If the goblins sent a hit team to get us, you can bet something big is going on below ground.'

Artemis was shocked. Holly had saved all their lives, and this was how he had repaid her. While it was true that he was not directly to blame for the injury, it had been inflicted while trying to save his father. There was a debt to be paid here.

'How long?' he snapped.

'What?'

'How long ago did it happen?'

'I don't know. A minute.'

'Then there's still time.'

The commander sat up. 'Time for what?'

'We can still save the finger.'

Root rubbed a welt of fresh scar tissue on his shoulder, a reminder of his trip along the side of the train. 'With what? I barely have enough power left for the mesmer.'

Artemis closed his eyes. Concentrating. 'What about the Ritual? There must be a way.'

All the People's magic came from the Earth. In order to top up their powers, they had to

periodically complete the Ritual.

'How can we complete the Ritual here?'

Artemis racked his brain. He had committed large sections of the Fairy Book to memory in preparation for the previous year's kidnapping operation.

*'From the earth thine power flows,
Given through courtesy, so thanks are owed.
Pluck thou the magick seed,
Where full moon, ancient oak and twisted water meet.
And bury it far from where it was found,
So return your gift into the ground.'*

Artemis scrambled across the flooring and began patting down Holly's jumpsuit.

Root's heart nearly shut down then and there. 'In heaven's name, Mud Boy, what are you doing?'

Artemis didn't even look up. 'Last year, Holly escaped because she had an acorn.'

Through some miracle, the commander managed to restrain himself. 'Five seconds, Fowl. Talk fast.'

'An officer like Holly wouldn't forget something like that. I'd be willing to bet . . ."

Root sighed. 'It's a good idea, Mud Boy. But the acorns have to be freshly picked. If it hadn't been for the time-stop, that seed mightn't have worked. You've got a couple of days, tops. I know Foaly and Holly put together some proposal for a sealed acorn unit, but the Council rejected it. Heresy apparently.'

It was a long speech for the commander. He wasn't used to explaining himself. But a part of him was hoping. Maybe, just maybe. Holly had never been averse to bending a few rules.

Artemis unzipped Captain Short's tunic. There were two tiny items on the gold chain around her neck. Her copy of the Book, the fairy bible. Artemis knew that it would combust if he tried to touch it without Holly's permission. But there was another item. A small plexiglass sphere filled with earth.

'That's against regulations,' said Root, not sounding too upset.

Holly stirred, half-emerging from her stupor. 'Hey, Commander. What happened to your eye?'

Artemis ignored her, cracking the tiny sphere against the carriage floor. Earth and a small acorn tumbled into his palm. 'Now all we need to do is bury it.'

The commander slung Holly over his shoulder. Artemis tried not to look at the space where her index finger used to be.

'Then it's time to get off this train.'

Artemis glanced at the Arctic landscape whipping past outside the carriage. Getting off the train wasn't as easy as the commander made it sound.

Butler dropped nimbly through the overhead hatch, where he'd been keeping an eye on the goblin hit squad.

'Nice to see you're so limber,' commented Artemis drily.

The manservant smiled. 'Good to see you too, Artemis.'

'Well? What did you see up there?' said Root, interrupting the reunion.

Butler placed a hand on his young master's shoulders. They could talk later. 'The goblins are gone. Funny thing. Two of them dropped low for reconnaissance, then the other one shot them in the back.'

Root nodded. 'Power play. Goblins are their own worst enemies. But right now, we've got

to get off this train.'

'There's another bend coming up in about half a klick,' said Butler. 'That's our best chance.'

'So, how do we disembark?' asked Artemis.

Butler grinned. 'Disembark is a pretty gentle term for what I have in mind.'

Artemis groaned. More running and jumping.

OPERATIONS' BOOTH

Foaly's brain was bubbling like a sea slug in a deep-fat fryer. He still had options, providing Cudgeon didn't actually shoot him. One shot and it was all over. Centaurs didn't have magic. Not a drop. They got by on brains alone. That and their ability to trample their enemies underfoot. But Foaly had a feeling that Briar wouldn't plug him just yet. Too busy gloating.

'Hey, Foaly,' said the lieutenant. 'Why don't you go for the intercom? See what happens.'

Foaly could guess what would happen. 'Don't worry, Briar. No sudden moves.'

Cudgeon laughed, and he sounded genuinely happy. 'Briar? First name terms now, is it? You must realize how much trouble you're in.'

Foaly was starting to realize just that. Beyond the tinted glass, LEP techs were beavering away trying to track down the mole, oblivious to the drama being played out not two metres away. He could see and hear them, but it was one-way surveillance.

The centaur had only himself to blame. He had insisted that the Operations' booth be constructed to his own paranoid standards. A titanium cube with blast-proof windows. The entire room was wireless, not even a fibre-optic cable to connect Operations to the outside world.

Totally impregnable. Unless, of course, you opened the door to throw a few insults at an old enemy. Foaly groaned. His mother had always said that his smart mouth would get him into trouble. But all was not lost. He still had a few tricks up his sleeve. A plasma floor, for instance.

'So what's this all about, Cudgeon?' asked the centaur, raising his hooves just off the tiles. 'And please don't say world domination.'

Cudgeon continued to smile. This was his/moment.

'Not immediately. The Lower Elements will suffice for now.'

'But why?'

Cudgeon's eyes were tinged with madness. 'Why? You have the gall to ask me why? I was the the Council's golden boy! In fifty years I would have been chairman! And then along comes the Artemis Fowl Affair. In one short day all my hopes are dashed. I end up deformed and demoted! And it was all because of you, Foaly. You and Root! So the only way to get my life back on track is to discredit both of you. You will be blamed for the goblin attacks, and Julius will be dead and dishonoured. And as an added bonus, I even get Artemis Fowl. It's as close to perfect as I could have hoped.'

Foaly snorted. 'Do you really think you can defeat the LEP with a handful of Softnose weapons?'

'Defeat the LEP? Why would I want to do that? I am the hero of the LEP. Or rather I will be. You will be the villain of this piece.'

'We'll see about that, baboon face,' said Foaly, activating a switch, sending an infra-red signal to a receiver in the floor. In five-tenths of a second, a secret membrane of plasma would warm up. Half a second later, a neutrino charge would spread across the plasma gel like wildfire, hopping anyone connected to the floor off at least three walls. In theory.

Cudgeon giggled delightedly. 'Don't tell me. Your plasma tiles aren't working.'

Foaly was flummoxed. Momentarily. Then he lowered his hooves gingerly and pressed another button. This one engaged a voice-activated laser. Basically, the next person to talk got plugged. The centaur held his breath.

'No plasma tiles,' continued Cudgeon. 'And no voice-activated laser. You really are slipping, Foaly. Not that I'm surprised. I always knew you'd be exposed for the donkey you are.'

The lieutenant settled into a swivel chair, propping his feet on the computer bank. 'So have you figured it out yet?'

Foaly thought. Who could it be? Who could beat him at his own game? Not Cudgeon, that was for sure. A techno fool if ever there was one. No, there was only one person with the ability to crack the Centaurian code and deactivate the booth's safety measures.

'Opal Koboi,' he breathed.

Cudgeon patted Foaly's head. 'That's right. Opal planted a few spy cams during the upgrading work. Once you were kind enough to translate a few documents for the camera, it was a simple matter to crack your code and do a little reprogramming. And the funny thing is, the Council footed the bill. She even charged for the spy cameras. Even now, the B'wa Kell is preparing to launch its attack on the cjty: LEP weapons and communications are down, and the best thing is that you, my horsy friend, will be held responsible. After all, you have locked yourself in the Operations' booth in the middle of a crisis.'

'Nobody will believe it!' protested Foaly.

'Oh yes they will, especially when you disengage the LEP security, including the DNA cannons.'

'Which I won't be doing anytime soon.'

Cudgeon twirled a matt-black remote between his fingers. 'I'm afraid it's not up to you any more. Opal took your little operation apart and wired the whole lot into this little beauty.'

Foaly swallowed. 'You mean . . .?'

'That's right,' said Cudgeon. 'Nothing works unless I press the button.'

He pressed the button. And even if Foaly had had the reactions of a sprite, he would never have had time to draw up all his hooves before the plasma shock blasted him right out of his specially modified swivel chair.

ARCTIC CIRCLE

Butler instructed everyone to attach themselves to the Moonbelt, one per link. Floating slightly in the buffeting wind, the group manoeuvred itself to the carriage doorway like a drunken crab.

It's simple physics, Artemis told himself. Reduced gravity will prevent us being dashed against the Arctic ice. In spite of all his logic, when Root launched the group into the night, Artemis couldn't hold back a single gasp. Later, when he replayed the incident in his mind's eye, Artemis would edit out the breath.

The slipstream spun them beyond the railway sleepers, into a drift. Butler turned off the anti-gravity belt a second before impact, otherwise they could have bounced away, like men on the moon.

Root was first to detach, scooping handfuls of snow from the surface until his fingers reached the compacted ice below.

'It's no use,' he said. 'I can't break through the ice.'

He heard a click behind his shoulder.

'Stand back,' advised Butler, taking aim with his handgun.

Root obliged, shielding his eyes with a forearm. Ice slivers could blind you just as efficiently as six-inch nails. Butler put a full clip into a narrow spread, blasting a shallow hollow in the frozen surface. Instant sleet drenched the already sodden group.

Root was checking the results before the smoke cleared. He brought Butler up to speed -- they had seconds left before Holly's time ran out. They needed to complete the Ritual. After a certain time it mightn't be wise to attempt a graft. Even if they could.

The commander jumped into the dip, sweeping aside layers of loose ice. There was a disk of brown among the white.

'Yes!' he crowed. 'Earth!'

Butler lowered Holly's twitching form into the hole. She seemed like a doll in his powerful hands. Tiny and limp. Root curled Holly's fingers around the illegal acorn, thrusting her left hand deep into the shattered soil. He pulled a roll of tape from his belt, crudely securing the finger to roughly its original position. The elf and two humans gathered around and waited.

'It mightn't take,' muttered Root nervously. 'This sealed acorn thing is new. Never been tested. Foaly and his ideas. But they usually work. They usually do.'

Artemis laid a hand on his shoulder. It was all he could think to do. Giving comfort was not one of his strong points.

Five seconds. Ten. Nothing.

Then . . .

'Look!' cried Artemis. 'A spark.'

A solitary blue spark travelled lazily along the length of Holly's arm, winding along the veins. It crossed her chest, climbed her pointed chin and sank into the flesh right between the eyes.

'Stand-back,' advised Root. 'I saw a two-minute healing in Tulsa one night. Damn near destroyed an entire shuttle port. I've never even heard of a four-minuter.'

They back-pedalled to the lip of the crater and not a moment too soon. More sparks erupted from the Earth, targeting Holly's hand as the area most in need of assistance. They sank into her finger joint like plasma torpedoes, melting the plastic tape.

Holly shot upright, arms swinging like a puppet. Her legs began to jerk, kicking invisible enemies. Then the vocal cords, a high-pitched keening that cracked the thinner sheets of ice.

'Is this normal?' whispered Artemis, as though Holly could hear.

'I think so,' answered the commander. 'The brain is running a systems check. It's not like fixing cuts and bruises, if you know what I mean.'

Every pore in Holly's body started to steam, venting trace radiation. She thrashed and kicked, sinking back down into a pool of slush. Not a pretty sight. The water evaporated, shrouding the LEP captain in mist. Only her left hand was visible, fingers a desperate blur.

Holly suddenly stopped moving. Her hand froze, then dropped through the mist. The Arctic night rushed in to reclaim the silence.

They inched closer, leaning into the fog. Artemis wanted to see, but he was afraid to look.

Butler took a breath, batting aside sheets of mist. All was quiet below. Holly's frame lay still as the grave.

Artemis peered at the shape in the hole. 'I think she's awake . . .'

He was cut short by Holly's sudden return to consciousness. She bolted upright, icicles coating her eyelashes and auburn hair. Her chest ballooned as she swallowed huge gulps of air.

Artemis grabbed her shoulders, for once abandoning his shell of icy composure. 'Holly. Holly, speak to me. Your finger. Is it OK?'

Holly wiggled her fingers, then curled them into a fist. 'I think so,' she said, and whacked Artemis right between the eyes. The surprised boy landed in a snowdrift for the fourth time that day.

Holly winked at an amazed Butler. 'Now, we're even,' she said.

Commander Root didn't have many treasured memories. But in future days, when things were at their grimmest, he would conjure up this moment and have a quiet chuckle.

OPERATIONS' BOOTH

Foaly woke up sore, which was unusual for him. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd experienced actual pain. His feelings had been hurt a few times by Julius's barbed comments, but actual physical discomfort was not something he cared to endure when he could avoid it.

The centaur was lying on the Operations' Security-booth floor, tangled in the remains of his office chair.

'Cudgeon,' he growled, and what followed was about two minutes' worth of unprintable obscenity.

When he had finally vented his anger, the centaur's brain kicked in, and he hauled himself up from the plasma tiles. His rump was singed. He was going to have a couple of bald spots on his hind quarters. Very unattractive in a centaur. It was the first thing a prospective mate looked for in a nightclub. Not that Foaly had ever been much of a dancer. Four left hooves.

The booth was sealed. Tighter than a gnome's wallet, as the saying went. Foaly typed in his exit code. 'Foaly. Doors.'

The computer remained silent.

He tried verbal. 'Foaly. One two one override. Doors.'

Not a peep. He was trapped. A prisoner of his own security devices. Even the windows were set to blackout, blocking his view of the Operations' room. Completely locked out, and locked in. Nothing worked.

Well, that wasn't completely accurate. Everything worked, but his precious computers wouldn't respond to his touch. And Foaly was only too well aware that there was no way out of the booth without access to the mainframe.

Foaly plucked the tin foil hat from his head, crunching it into a ball.

'A lot of good you did me!' he said, tossing it into the waste recycler. The recycler would analyse the chemical make-up of the item, then divert it to the appropriate tank.

A plasma monitor crackled into life on the wall. Opal Koboï's magnified face appeared, plastered with the widest grin the centaur had ever seen.

'Hello, Foaly. Long time no see.'

Foaly returned the grin, but his wasn't quite as wide. 'Opal. How nice to see you. How are the folks?' Everyone knew how Opal had bankrupted her father. It was a legend in the corporate world.

'Very well, thanks. Cumulus House is a lovely asylum.'

Foaly decided he would try sincerity. It was a tool he didn't use very often. But he would give it a go.

'Opal. Think about what you're doing. Cudgeon is insane, for pity's sake. Once he has

what he wants, he will dispose of you in a heartbeat!

The pixie shook a perfectly manicured finger. 'No, Foaly, you're wrong. Briar needs me. He really does. He'd be nothing without me and my gold.'

The centaur looked deep into Opal's eyes. The pixie actually believed what she was saying. How could someone so brilliant be so deluded?

'I know what this is all about, Opal.'

'Oh, you do?'

'Yes. You're still sore because I won the science medal back in university.'

For a second, Kobo's composure slipped, and her features didn't seem quite so perfect.

'That medal was mine, you stupid centaur. My wing design was far superior to your ridiculous iris-cam. You won because you were a male. And that's the only reason.'

Foaly grinned, satisfied. Even with the odds so hugely against him, he hadn't lost the ability to be the most annoying creature under the world when he wanted to be.

'So what do you want, Opal? Or did you just call to chat about our schooldays?'

Opal took a long drink from a crystal glass. 'I just called, Foaly, to let you know I'm watching, so don't try anything. I also wanted to show you something from the security cameras downtown. This is live footage by the way, and Briar is with the Council right now, blaming you for it. Happy viewing.'

Opal's face disappeared to be replaced by a high-angle view of downtown Haven. A tourist district, outside Spud's Spud Emporium. Generally, this area would be thronged with Atlantean couples taking photos of each other in front of the fountain. But not today, because today the square was a battleground. The B'wa Kell was waging open war with the LEP and, by the looks of things, it was a one-sided battle. The goblins were firing their Softnose weapons, but the police were not shooting back. They just huddled behind whatever shelter they could find. Completely helpless.

Foaly's jaw dropped. This was disastrous. And he was being blamed for everything. Of course, the thing about scapegoats was that they could not be left alive to protest their innocence. He had to get a message to Holly, and fast, or they were all dead fairies.

CHAPTER 10: TROUBLE AND STRIFE

DOWNTOWN HAVEN

SPUD'S Spud Emporium was not a place you wanted to be on the best of days. The fries were greasy, the meat was mysterious and the milkshakes had gristly lumps. Nevertheless, the Emporium did a roaring trade, especially during the solstice.

At this precise moment, Captain Trouble Kelp would almost have preferred to be inside the fast-food joint, choking down a rubbery burger, than outside it dodging lasers. Almost.

With Root out of the picture, field command fell to Captain Kelp. Usually this was a responsibility he would have relished. But then again, usually he would have had the benefit of transport and weapons. Thankfully they still had communications.

Trouble and his patrol had been rousting B'wa Kell hot spots when they were bushwhacked by a hundred members of the reptilian triad. The goblins had positioned themselves on the rooftops, catching the LEP squad in a deadly crossfire from Softnose lasers and fireballs. Pretty complex thinking for the B'wa Kell. The average goblin found simultaneous scratching and spitting a challenge. They had to be getting their orders from someone.

Trouble and one of his junior corporals were pinned down behind a photo booth, while the remaining officers had managed to take cover in Spud's Emporium.

For the moment, they were keeping the goblins at bay with tasers and buzz batons. The tasers had a range of ten metres, and the buzz batons were only good for close quarters. Both ran on electric batteries and would run out eventually. After that they were down to rocks and bare fists. They didn't even have the advantage of shielding as the B'wa Kell was equipped with LEP combat helmets. Older models certainly, but still fitted with anti-shield filters.

A fireball arced over the booth, melting through the asphalt at their feet. The goblins were wising up. Relatively speaking. Instead of trying to blast through the booth, they were lobbing missiles over it. Time was short now.

Trouble tapped his mike. 'Kelp to base. Anything on weapons?'

'Not a thing, Cap,' came the reply. 'Plenty of officers with nuthin to shoot 'cept their fingers. We're charging up the old 'lectric guns, but that's gonna take eight hours minimum. There are a coupla body-armour suits over in Recon. I'm having 'em double-timed over to you right now. Five minutes. Tops.'

'D'ArvitF swore the cap tain. They were going to have to move. Any second now this booth would fall apart and they would be sitting ducks for goblin fire. Beside him the corporal was quivering in terror.

'For heaven's sake,' snapped Trouble. 'Pull yourself together.'

'You shut up, Trub,' retorted his brother, Grub, through wobbly lips. 'You were supposed to look out for me. Mummy said.'

Trouble waved a threatening finger. 'It's Captain Kelp while we're on duty, Corporal. And for your information, I am looking out for you.'

'Oh, this is looking out for me, is it?' whined Grub, pouting.

Trouble didn't know who annoyed him more, his kid brother or the goblins.

'OK, Grub. This booth isn't going to last much longer. We've got to make a break for the Emporium. Understand?'

Grub's wobbling lip suddenly stiffened considerably. 'No chance. I'm not moving. You can't make me. I don't mind if I stay here for the rest of my life.'

Trouble raised his visor. 'Listen to me. Listen. The rest of your life is going to be about thirty seconds. We have to go.'

'But the goblins, Trub.'

Captain Kelp grabbed his brother by the shoulders. 'Don't you worry about the goblins. You worry about my foot connecting with your behind if you slow down.'

Grub winced. He'd had that experience before. 'We're going to be all right, aren't we, brother?'

Trouble winked. 'Of course we are. I'm the captain, aren't I?'

His little brother nodded, lip losing its stiffness.

'Good. Now you point your nose at the door and go when I say. Got it?'

More nodding. Grub's chin was bobbing faster than a woodpecker's beak.

'Right, Corporal. Standby. On my command . . ."

Another fireball. Closer this time. Rising black smoke from Trouble's rubber soles. The captain poked his nose around the wall. A laser burst almost gave him a third nostril. A steel sandwich board spun around the corner, dancing with the force of a dozen charges. Foto Finish the sign said. Or Fot Finish to be precise. The V had been blasted out of it. Not laserproof then. But it would have to do.

Trouble snared the revolving board, draping it over his shoulders. Armour, of sorts. The LEP suits were lined with micro-filaments that would dissipate neutrino blasts or even sonic bursts, but Softnoses hadn't been used below ground for decades, so the suits hadn't been designed to withstand them. A burst would tear through the LEP uniform like so much rice paper.

He poked his brother in the back. 'Ready?'

Grub may have nodded, or it may have been that his entire body was shaking.

Trouble gathered his legs beneath him, adjusting the sandwich board across his chest and back. It would withstand a couple of rounds. After that, his own body would be providing cover for Grub.

Another fireball. Directly between them and the Emporium. In a moment, the flame would sink a hole in the tarmac. They had to go now. Through the fire.

'Seal your helmet!'

'Why?'

'Just seal it, Corporal.'

Grub did. You could argue with a brother, but not a commanding officer.

Trouble placed a hand on Grub's back and pushed. Hard. 'Go, go, go!'

They went, straight through the white heart of the flame. Trouble heard the filaments in his suit pop as they tried to cope with the heat. Boiling tar sucked at his boots, melting the rubber soles.

Then they were through, stumbling towards the double doors. Trouble scrubbed the soot from his visor. His men were waiting, huddled behind riot shields. Two paramedic warlocks had their gloves off, ready to lay on hands.

Ten metres to go.

On they ran.

The goblins found range. A hail of charges sang through the air around them, pulverizing what was left of the Emporium's shop front. Trouble's crown lurched forward as a slug flattened

itself against his helmet. More charges. Lower down. A tight grouping between his shoulder blades. The sandwich board held.

The impact lifted the captain like a kite, slapping him into his brother, and carrying them both through the decimated double doors. They were instantly hauled behind a wall of riot shields.

'Grub,' gasped Captain Kelp, through the pain and noise and soot. 'Is he OK?'

'Fine,' answered the senior warlock paramedic, rolling Trouble on to his stomach. 'Your back on the other hand, is going to have some lovely bruises in the morning.'

Captain Kelp waved the warlock away. 'Any word from the commander?'

The warlock shook his head. 'Nothing. Root is missing in action and Cudgeon has been reinstated as commander. Even worse, now they're saying Foaly is behind this whole thing.'

Trouble paled, and it wasn't from the pain in his back. 'Foaly! It can't be true.'

Trouble ground his teeth in frustration. Foaly and the commander. He had no choice, he would have to do it. The one thing he had nightmares about.

Captain Kelp struggled up on to one elbow. The air above their heads was alive with the buzz of Softnose bursts. It was only a matter of time before they were completely overrun. It had to be done.

Trouble took a breath. 'OK, people. Listen up. Retreat to Police Plaza.'

The troops froze. Even Grub caught himself in mid-sob. Retreat?

'You heard me!' snarled Trouble. 'Retreat. We can't hold the streets without arms. Now move it out.'

The LEP shuffled to the service entrance, unaccustomed to losing. Call it retreat, call it a tactical manoeuvre. It was still running away. And who would have thought that order would ever come out of Trouble Kelp's mouth?

ARCTIC SHUTTLE PORT

Artemis and his fellow travellers took shelter in the shuttle port. Holly made the journey slung over Butler's shoulder. She protested loudly for several minutes until the commander ordered her to shut up.

'You've just had major magical surgery,' he pointed out. 'So just stay quiet and do your exercises.' It was vital that Holly manipulate her finger constantly for the next hour or so to ensure the right tendons got reconnected. It was very important she move her index finger the way she intended to use it later, especially as she would be firing a weapon.

They huddled around a glow cube in the deserted departure lounge.

'Any water?' asked Holly. 'I feel dehydrated after that healing.'

Root winked, something that didn't happen very often. 'Here's a little trick I learned in the field.' He popped a flat-nosed shell from a clip in his belt. It seemed to be made from perspex and filled with clear liquid.

'You won't get much of a drink from that,' commented Butler.

'More than you'd think. This is a Hydrosion shell: a miniature fire extinguisher. The water is compressed into a tiny space. You fire it into the heart of a fire and the impact reverses the compressor. Half a litre of water is blasted at the flames. More effective than a hundred litres poured. We call them Fizzers.'

'Very good,' said Artemis drily. 'If you could use your weapons.'

'Don't need 'em,' said Root, drawing a large knife. 'Manual works just as well.'

He pointed the shell's flat tip at the mouth of a canteen and popped the lid. A fizzing spray jetted into the container.

'There you are, Captain. Never let it be said I don't look after my officers.'

'Clever,' admitted Artemis.

'And the best thing is,' said the commander, pocketing the empty Fizzer. 'These things are completely reusable. All I have to do is stick it in a pile of snow and the compressor will do the rest, so I won't even have Foaly on my case for wasting equipment.'

Holly took a long drink and soon the colour surged back to her cheeks.

'So we were ambushed by a B'wa Kell hit team,' she mused. 'What does that mean?'

'It means you have a leak,' said Artemis, holding his hands close to the cube's warmth. 'It was my impression that this mission was top secret. Not even your Council was informed.'

The only person who isn't here is that centaur.'

Holly jumped to her feet. 'Foaly? It can't be.'

Artemis raised his palms. 'Logic. That's all it is.'

'This is all very well,' interrupted the commander, 'but it's conjecture. We need to assess our situation. What have we got, and what do we know for sure?'

Butler nodded. The commander was a being after his own heart. A soldier.

Root answered his own question. 'We've still got the shuttle, provided it's not wired. There's a locker full of provisions. Atlantean food mostly, so get used to fish and squid.'

'And what do we know?'

Artemis took over. 'We know that the goblins have a source in the LER. We also know if they tried to take out the LEP's head, Commander Root, then they must be after the body. Their best chance of success would be to mount both operations simultaneously.' Holly chewed her lip. 'So that means that means there is probably some kind of revolution going on below ground.'

'The B'wa Kell against the LEP?' scoffed Holly. 'No problem.'

'Generally, that may be true,' agreed Artemis. 'But if your weapons are out'

'Then so are theirs,' completed Root, 'in theory.' Artemis moved closer to the glow cube. 'Worst-case scenario: Haven has been taken by the B'wa Kell, and the Council members are either dead or imprisoned. Quite honestly, things look grim.'

Neither fairy responded. Grim hardly did the situation justice. Disastrous was closer to the mark.

Even Artemis was slightly disheartened. None of this was helping his father.

'I suggest we rest here for a while, pack some provisions, and then proceed towards Murmansk as soon as we get some cloud cover. Butler can search this man Vassikin's apartment. Perhaps we will be lucky and my father will be there. I realize that we are at a slight disadvantage without weapons, but we still have surprise on our side.'

No one spoke for several moments. It was an uneasy silence. Everybody knew what should be said, but nobody wanted to say it.

'Artemis,' said Butler eventually, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'We're in no shape to go up against the Mafiya. We don't have any firepower, and our colleagues need to get below ground, so we don't have any magic. If we go in there now, we're not coming out. Any of us.'

Artemis stared deep into the heart of the glow cube. 'But my father is so close, Butler. I can't give up now.'

In spite of herself, Holly was touched by his unwillingness to give up, against all the odds. She was certain that, for once, Artemis wasn't trying to manipulate anybody. He was simply a boy who missed his father. Maybe her defences were down, but she felt sorry for him.

'We're not giving up, Artemis,' she said softly. 'We're regrouping. There's a difference. We'll be back. Remember, it's always darkest before the dawn.'

Artemis looked at her. 'What dawn? We're in the Arctic, remember.'

OPERATIONS' BOOTH

Foaly was furious with himself. After all the security encryptions he'd built into his systems, Opal Koboi had simply strolled in here and hijacked the entire network. And what's more, the LEP had paid her for the job.

The centaur had to admire her nerve. It was a brilliantly simple plan. Apply for the upgrade contract, submit the lowest estimate. Get the LEP to give you an access-all-areas chip and then piggyback spy cams on the local systems. She had even billed the LEP for the surveillance equipment.

Foaly pushed a few buttons experimentally. No response. Not that he'd expected any. Doubtless, Opal Koboi had everything wired, down to the last fibre optic. Perhaps she was watching him at this very moment. He could just imagine her. Coiled up on a Koboi Hoverboy giggling at the plasma screen. His greatest rival, gloating over his destruction.

Foaly growled. She may have caught him off guard once, but it wouldn't happen again. He would not go to pieces for Opal Koboi's entertainment . . . Then again, maybe he would.

The centaur cradled his head between his hands, the picture of a beaten fairy, and began to heave theatrical sobs. He peeped out between his fingers . . . Now, if I were a button camera, where would I hide? Somewhere the sweeper wouldn't check. Foaly glanced at the bug sweeper, a small, complex-looking mass of cables and chips attached to the roof. The only place the sweeper didn't check was inside the sweeper itself . . .

So now he knew Opal's vantage point, for all the good it did him. If the camera was piggybacking inside the sweeper, there would be a small blindspot directly below the unit's titanium casing, but the pixie could still see everything of importance. He was still locked out of the computer and locked in the Operations' booth.

He began to scan the booth. What had come in since the last batch of Koboi upgrades? There must be some untainted equipment . . .

But there was nothing except junk. A roll of fibre-optic cable. A few conductor clips and a few tools. Nothing useful. Then something winked at him from beneath a workstation. A green light.

Foaly's heart jumped ten beats per minute. He knew instantly what it was. Artemis Fowl's laptop computer. Complete with modem and e-mail capability. He willed himself to maintain calm. Opal Koboi couldn't possibly have bugged it. The device had only come in hours ago. He hadn't even got around to dismantling it yet.

The centaur clopped across to his toolbox and, in a fit of frustration, dumped the contents on to the plasma tiles. He was not so frustrated that he forgot to snag some cable and snips. The next step in his faked breakdown was to flop on to the worktop, sobbing uncontrollably. Naturally he had to flop over the precise spot where Holly had left the laptop. With a casual kick, Foaly slid the computer into the space where the sweeper's blindspot should be. He then threw himself on to the floor, kicking his legs in a furious tantrum. From the button camera, Opal shouldn't be able to see more than his thrashing legs.

So far so good. Foaly popped the laptop's lid, quickly shutting off the speakers. Humans would insist on their machines beeping at the most inopportune moments. He allowed one hand

to drag across the keyboard and moments later he was in the e-mail program.

Now for the problem. Wireless Internet access is one thing, but access from the centre of the Earth is quite another. Cradling his head in the crook of one arm, Foaly jimmied one end of a fibre-optic cable into a scope uplink port. The scopes were shrouded trackers concealed on American communications satellites. Now he had an aerial. Let's hope Mud Boy was switched on.

KOBOI LABORATORIES

Opal Koboi had never had so much fun. The underworld was literally her plaything. She stretched on her Koboi Hoverboy like a contented cat, eyes devouring the chaos on the plasma monitors. The LEP had no chance. It was only a matter of time before the B'wa Kell gained access to Police Plaza, then the city was theirs. Next came Atlantis, then the human world.

Opal floated between screens, soaking up every detail. In the city, goblins flowed from every centimetre of darkness, armed and thirsty for blood. Softnose slugs ripped chunks from historical edifices. Ordinary fairies barricaded themselves in their houses, praying that the marauding gangs would pass them by. Businesses were looted and torched. Not too much torching, she hoped. Opal Koboi had no desire to be queen of a war zone.

A com screen opened on the main display. It was Cudgeon on their secure line. And he actually seemed happy. The cold happiness of revenge.

'Briar,' squealed Opal. 'This is wonderful. I wish you were here to see it.'

'Soon. I must remain with my troops. After all, because I was the one who unearthed Foaly's treachery, the Council has reinstated me as commander. How is our prisoner?'

Opal glanced at the Foaly screen. 'Disappointing, frankly. I expected some plotting. An escape attempt, at least. But all he does is mope about and throw the odd tantrum.'

Cudgeon's smile widened. 'Suicidal, I expect. In fact, I'm certain of it.' Then the recently promoted commander was all business again. 'What of the LEP? Any unexpected brainwaves?'

'No. Exactly as you predicted. They are cowering in Police Plaza like tortoises in their shells. Shall I shut off local communications?'

Cudgeon shook his head. 'No. They broadcast their every move on their so-called secure channels. Keep them open. Just in case.'

Opal Koboi hovered closer to the screen. 'Tell me again, Briar. Tell me about the future.'

For a moment, annoyance flashed across Cudgeon's face. But today, of all days, his good humour could not be suppressed for long.

'The Council has been told that Foaly has orchestrated the sabotage from his locked Operations' booth. But you shall miraculously override the centaur's program and return control of Police Plaza's DNA cannons to the LEP. Those ridiculous goblins shall be overrun. I shall be the hero of the resistance, and you shall be my princess. Every military contract for the next five hundred years shall belong to Koboi Laboratories.'

Opal's breath caught in her throat. 'And then?' 'And then, together we will rid the Earth of these tiresome Mud People. That, my dear, is the future.'

ARCTIC SHUTTLE TERMINAL

Artemis's phone rang. Something even he hadn't anticipated. He stripped off a glove with his teeth, tearing the mobile phone from its Velcro strip.

'Text message,' he said, navigating through the mobile phone's menu. 'No one has this number except Butler.'

Holly folded her arms. 'Obviously someone has.'

Artemis ignored her tone. 'It must be Foaly. He's been monitoring my wireless communications for months. Either he's using my computer, or he's found a way to unify our platforms.'

'I see,' said Butler and Root together. Two big lies.

Holly was unimpressed by all the jargon. 'So what does it say?'

Artemis tapped the tiny screen. 'See for yourself.'

Captain Short took the mobile phone, scrolling through the message and reading it aloud. Her face grew longer with each line . . .

CMNDR ROOT. TRBLE BELOW. HAVN OVERRN BY GOBLNS. PLICE PLAZA SRROUNDED. CUDGEON + OPL KBOI BHND PLOT. NO WPONS OR COMMUNICATIONS. DNA CNONS CNTRLLED BY KBOI. I M TRPPED IN OP BTH. CNCLTHNKS IM 2 BLM. IF ALIVE PLSE HLP. IF NOT, WRNG NMBR.

Holly swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. 'This is not good.'

The commander jumped to his feet, grabbing the mobile phone to read the message for himself.

'No,' he declared moments later. 'It certainly isn't. Cudgeon! All the time it was Cudgeon. Why didn't I see it? Can we get a message to Foaly?'

Artemis considered it. 'No. There's no network here. I'm surprised we could even receive.'

'Couldn't you rig it somehow?'

'Certainly. Just give me six months, some specialized equipment and three kilometres of steel girder.'

Holly snorted. 'Some criminal mastermind you turned out to be.'

Butler placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'Shh,' he whispered. 'Artemis is thinking.'

Artemis stared deep into the glow cube's liquid-plasma heart. 'We have two options,' he began, after a moment. Nobody interrupted, not even Holly. After all, it had been Artemis Fowl who had devised a way to escape the time field.

'We could get some human aid. No doubt some of Butler's more dubious acquaintances could be persuaded to help, for a fee, of course.'

Root shook his head. 'No good.'

'They could be mind-wiped afterwards.'

'Sometimes wipes don't take. The last thing we need is mercenaries with residual memories. Option Two?'

'We break into Koboil Laboratories and return weapons control to the LEP.'

The commander guffawed. 'Break into Koboil Laboratories? Are you serious? That entire compound is built on bedrock. There are no windows, totally blast-resistant walls and DNA stun cannons. Any unauthorized personnel that come within a hundred metres get blasted right between the pointy ears.'

Butler whistled. 'Seems like a whole lot of hardware for an engineering company.'

'I know,' sighed Root. 'Koboil Labs had special permits. I signed them myself.'

Butler considered it for several moments. 'Can't be done,' he pronounced eventually. 'Not without the blueprints.'

'D'Arvit,' swore the commander. 'I never thought I'd say this, but there's only one fairy for a job like this . . .'

Holly nodded. 'Mulch Diggums.'

'Diggums?'

'A dwarf. Career criminal. The only fairy ever to break into Koboï Laboratories and live. Unfortunately, we lost him last year. Tunnelling out of your manor as it happens.'

'I remember him,' said Butler. 'Nearly took my head off. A slippery character.'

Root laughed softly. 'Eight times I nabbed old Mulch. The last one was for the Koboï Labs job. As I recall, Mulch and his cousin set up as building contractors. A way to get plans for secure facilities. They got the Koboï contract. Mulch left himself a back door. Typical Diggums, he breaks into the most secure facility under the planet, then tries to sell an alchemy vat to one of my squeals.'

Artemis sat up. 'Alchemy? You have alchemy vats?'

'Stop drooling, Mud Boy. They're experimental. The ancient warlocks used to be able to turn lead into gold, according to the Book, but the secret was lost. Even Opal Koboï hasn't managed it yet.'

'Oh,' said Artemis, disappointed.

'Believe it or not, I almost miss that criminal. He had a way of insulting a person . . .'

Root glanced towards the heavens. 'I wonder if he's up there now, looking down on us.'

'In a manner of speaking,' said Holly guiltily. 'Actually, Commander, Mulch Diggums is in Los Angeles.'

CHAPTER 11: MULCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

LOS ANGELES, USA

MULCH Diggums was, in fact, outside the apartment of an Oscar-winning actress. Of course, she didn't know he was there.

And, naturally, he was up to no good. Once a thief, always a thief.

Not that Mulch needed the money. He'd done very well out of the Artemis Fowl Affair. Well enough to take out a lease on a penthouse apartment in Beverly Hills. He'd stocked the apartment with a Pioneer entertainment system, a full DVD library and enough beef jerky to last a lifetime. Time for a decade of rest and relaxation.

But life is not like that. It refuses to curl up and sit quietly in a corner. The habits of several centuries would not go away. Halfway through the James Bond Collection, Mulch realized that he missed the bad old days. Soon the penthouse suite's reclusive occupant was taking midnight strolls. These strolls generally ended up inside other people's homes.

Initially Mulch just visited, savouring the thrill of defeating sophisticated Mud Man security systems. Then he began to take trophies. Small things -- a crystal goblet, an ashtray, or a cat if he was peckish. But soon Mulch Diggums began to crave the old notoriety and his pilferings grew larger. Gold bars, goose egg diamonds, or pit bull terriers if he was really famished.

The Oscar thing began quite by accident. He nabbed one as a curiosity on a midweek break to New York. Best original screenplay. The following morning he was front page news coast to coast. You'd think he'd ripped off a medical convoy instead of a gilded statuette. Mulch, of course, was delighted. He'd found his new nocturnal pastime.

In the next fortnight, Mulch filched best soundtrack and best special effects Academy Awards. The tabloids went crazy. They even gave him a nickname: the Grouch, after another well-known Oscar. When Mulch read that one, his toes wriggled for joy. And dwarf toes wriggling are quite a sight. They are as nimble as fingers, double-jointed and the less said about the smell the better. Mulch's mission became clear. He had to assemble an entire set.

Over the next six months, the Grouch struck all across the United States. He even made a trip to Italy to collect a best foreign-language film award. He had a special cabinet made, with tinted glass that could be blacked out at the touch of a button. Mulch Diggums felt alive again.

Of course, every Oscar winner on the planet trebled their security, which was just the way Mulch liked it. There was no challenge in breaking into a shack on the beach. High rise and high-tech. That's what the public wanted. So that's what the Grouch gave them. The papers ate it up. He was a hero. During the daylight hours, when he couldn't venture outside, Mulch busied himself writing the screenplay of his own exploits.

Tonight was a big night. The last statuette. He was going for a best actress award. And not just any old best actress. Tonight's target was the tempestuous Jamaican beauty, Maggie V. This year's winner for her portrayal of Precious, a tempestuous Jamaican beauty. Maggie V had stated publicly that if the Grouch tried anything in her apartment, he would get a lot more than he had bargained for. How could Mulch resist a challenge like that?

The building itself was easy to locate, a ten-storey block of glass and steel just off Sunset

Boulevard, a midnight stroll south of Mulch's own home. So one cloudy night, the intrepid dwarf packed his tools, preparing to burglarize his way into the history books.

Maggie V was on the top floor. There was no question of going up the stairs, lift or shaft. It would have to be an outside job.

In preparation for the climb, Mulch had not had anything to drink in two days. Dwarf pores are not just for sweating, they can take in moisture too. Very handy when you are trapped in a cave-in for days on end. Even if you can't get your mouth to a drink, every centimetre of skin can leech water from the surrounding earth. When a dwarf was thirsty, as Mulch was now, his pores opened to the size of pinholes and began to suck like crazy. This could be extremely useful if, say, you had to climb up the side of a tall building.

Mulch took off his shoes and gloves, donned a stolen LEP helmet and began to climb.

CHUTE E93

Holly could feel the commander's glare crisping the hairs on the back of her neck. She tried to ignore it, concentrating on not dashing the Atlantean ambassador's shuttle against the walls of the Arctic chute.

'So, all this time, you knew Mulch Diggums was alive?'

Holly nudged the starboard thruster to avoid a missile of half-melted rock. 'Not for sure. Foaly just had this theory.'

The commander wrung an imaginary neck. 'Foaly! Why am I not surprised?'

Artemis smirked from his seat in the passenger area.

'Now, you two, we need to work together as a team.'

'So tell me about Foaly's theory, Captain,' ordered Root, belting himself into the co-pilot's seat.

Holly activated a static wash on the shuttle's external cameras. Positive and negative charges dislodged the sheets of dust from the lenses.

'Foaly thought Mulch's death a bit suspicious, given that he was the best tunnel fairy in the business.'

'So why didn't he come to me?'

'It was just a hunch. With respect, you know what you're like with hunches, Commander.'

Root nodded grudgingly. It was true, he didn't have time for hunches. It was hard evidence, or get out of my office until you've got some.

'The centaur did a bit of investigating in his own time. The first thing he realized was that the gold recovered was a bit light. I negotiated for the return of half the ransom and, by Foaly's reckoning, the cart was about two dozen bars short.'

The commander lit one of his trademark fungus cigars. He had to admit it sounded promising: gold missing, Mulch Diggums within a hundred miles. Two and two make four.

'As you know, it's standard procedure to spray any LEP property with solinium-based tracker, including the ransom gold. So, Foaly runs a scan for solinium, and he picks up hot spots all over Los Angeles. Particularly at the Crowley Hotel in Beverly Hills. When he hacks into the building computer, he finds the penthouse resident is listed as one Lance Digger.'

Root's pointy ears quivered. 'Digger?'

'Exactly,' said Holly, nodding. 'A bit more than coincidence. Foaly came to me at that point, and I advised him to get some satellite photos before taking the file to you. Except . . .'

'Except Mister Digger is proving very elusive. Am I right?'

'Dead on.'

Root's colouring went from rose to tomato. 'Mulch, that rascal. How did he do it?'

Holly shrugged. 'We're guessing he transferred his iris-cam to some local wildlife, maybe a rabbit. Then collapsed the tunnel.'

'So the life signs we were reading belonged to some rabbit.'

'Exactly. In theory.'

'I'll kill him,' exclaimed Root, pounding the control panel. 'Can't this bucket go any faster?'

LOS ANGELES

Mulch scaled the building without much difficulty. There were external closed-circuit cameras, but the helmet's ion filter showed exactly where these cameras were pointed. It was a simple matter to crawl along the blind spots.

Within an hour, the dwarf was suckered outside Maggie V's apartment on the tenth floor. The windows were triple glazed with a bulletproof coating. Movie stars. Paranoid, every one of them.

Naturally, there was an alarm point sitting on top of the pane and a motion sensor crouching on a wall like a frozen cricket. Only to be expected.

Mulch melted a hole in the glass with a bottle of dwarf rock polish, used to clean up diamonds in the mines. Humans actually cut diamonds to shine them. Imagine. Half the stone down the drain.

Next, the Grouch used the helmet's ion filter to sweep the room for the motion sensor's range. The red ion-stream revealed that the sensor was focused on the floor. No matter. Mulch intended going along the wall.

Pores still crying out for water, the dwarf crept along the partition, making maximum use of a stainless-steel shelving system that almost completely surrounded the main sitting room.

The next step was to find the actual Oscar. It could be hidden anywhere, including under Maggie V's pillow, but this room was as good a place to start as any. You never knew, he might get lucky.

Mulch activated the helmet's X-ray filter, scanning the walls for a safe. Nothing. He tried the floor; humans were getting smarter these days. There, under a fake zebra rug, a metal cuboid. Easy.

The Grouch approached the motion sensor from above, very gently twisting the neck until the gadget was surveying the ceiling. The floor was now safe.

Mulch dropped to the rug, testing the surface with his tactile toes. No pressure pads sewn into the rug's lining. He rolled back the fake skin, revealing a hatch in the wooden floor. The joints were barely visible to the naked eye. But Mulch was an expert and his eyes weren't naked, they were aided by LEP zoom lenses.

He wormed a nail into the crack, flipping the hatch. The safe itself was a bit of a disappointment. Not even lead-lined; he could see right into the mechanism with the X-ray filter. A simple combination lock. Only three digits.

Mulch turned the filter off. What was the point in breaking a see-through lock? Instead he put his ear to the door, jiggling the dial. In fifteen seconds the door was open at his feet.

The Oscar's gold plating winked at him. Mulch made a big mistake at that moment. He relaxed. In the Grouch's mind he was already back in his own apartment, swigging from a

two-litre bottle of ice-cold water. And relaxed thieves are destined for prison.

Mulch neglected to check the statuette for traps, plucking it straight from the safe. If he had checked he would have realized that there was a wire attached magnetically to the base. When the Oscar was moved, a circuit was broken allowing all hell to break loose.

CHUTE E93

Holly set the auto-pilot to hover at three thousand metres below the surface. She slapped herself on the chest, releasing the harness, and joined the others in the rear of the shuttle.

'Two problems. Firstly, if we go any lower, we'll be picked up on the scanners, presuming they're still operating.'

'Why am I not looking forward to number two?' asked Butler.

'Secondly, this part of the chute was retired when we pulled out of the Arctic.'

'Which means?'

'Which means the supply tunnels were collapsed. We have no way into the chute system without supply tunnels.'

'No problem,' declared Root. 'We blast the wall.'

Holly sighed. 'With what, Commander? This is a diplomatic craft. We don't have any cannons.'

Butler plucked two concussor eggs from a pouch on his Moonbelt. 'Will these do? Foaly thought they might come in handy.'

Artemis groaned. If he didn't know better, he'd swear the manservant was enjoying this.

LOS ANGELES

'Uh oh,' breathed Mulch.

In a matter of moments, things had gone from rosy to extremely dangerous. Once the security circuit was broken, a side door slid open admitting two very large German shepherds. The ultimate watchdogs. They were followed by their handler, a huge man covered in protective clothing. It looked as though he were dressed in doormats. Obviously the dogs were unstable.

'Nice doggies,' said Mulch, slowly unbuttoning his bum-flap.

CHUTE E93

Holly nudged the flight controls, inching the shuttle closer to the chute wall.

'That's as near as we get,' she said into her helmet mike. 'Any closer and the thermals could flip us against the rock face.'

'Thermals?' growled Root. 'You never said anything about thermals before I climbed out here.'

The commander was spread-eagled on the port wing, a concussor egg jammed down each boot.

'Sorry, Commander, someone has to fly this bird.' Root muttered under his breath, dragging himself closer to the wing-tip. While the turbulence was nowhere as severe as it would have been on a moving aircraft, the buffeting thermals were quite enough to shake the commander like dice in a cup. All that kept him going was the thought of his fingers tightening around Mulch Diggums's throat.

'Another metre,' he gasped into the mike. At least they had communications, the shuttle had its own local intercom. 'One more metre and I can make it.'

'No go, Commander. That's your lot.'

Root risked a peek into the abyss. The chute stretched on forever, winding down to the orange magma glow at the Earth's core. This was madness. Crazy. There must be another way. At this point, the commander would even be willing to risk an over-ground flight.

Then Julius Root had a vision. It could have been the sulphur fumes, stress or even lack of food. But the commander could have sworn Mulch Diggums's features appeared before him, etched into the rock face. The face was sucking on a cigar and smirking.

His determination returned in a surge. Bested by a criminal. Not likely.

Root clambered to his feet, drying sweaty palms on his jumpsuit. The thermals plucked at his limbs like mischievous ghosts.

'Ready to put some distance between us and this soon-to-be hole?' he shouted into the mike.

'Bet on it, Commander,' responded Holly. 'Soon as we have you back in the hold, we're out of here.'

'OK. Standby.'

Root fired the piton dart from his belt. The titanium head sank easily into the rock. The commander knew that tiny charges inside the dart would blow out two flanges securing it inside the face. Five metres. Not a great distance to swing on a piton cord. But it wasn't the swing really. It was the bone-crushing drop and the lack of handholds on the chute wall.

Come on, Julius, sniggered the Mulch edifice. Let's see what you look like splattered against a wall.

'You shut your mouth, convict,' roared the commander. And he jumped, swinging into the void.

The rock face rushed out to meet him, knocking the breath from his lungs. Root ground his back teeth against the pain. He hoped nothing was broken, because after the Russian trip, he didn't even have enough magic left to make a daisy bloom, never mind heal a fractured rib.

The shuttle's forward lights picked out the laser burns where the LEP tunnel dwarfs had sealed the supply chute. That weld line would be the weak spot. Root slotted the concussion eggs along two indents.

'I'm coming for you, Diggums,' he muttered, crushing the capsule detonators embedded in each one. Thirty seconds now.

Root aimed a second piton dart at the shuttle wing. An easy shot, he made this kind of thing in his sleep in the sim-range. Unfortunately, the simulators didn't have thermals fouling things up at the last moment.

Just as the commander fired his dart, the edge of a particularly strong whirlpool of gas caught the shuttle's rear, spinning it forty degrees anti-clockwise. The dart missed by a metre. It spun into the abyss, trailing the commander's lifeline behind it. Root had two options: he could rewind the cord using his belt winch, or he could jettison the piton and try again with his spare. Julius unhooked the cord; it would be faster to try again. A good plan, had he not already used his spare to get them out from under the ice. The commander remembered this half a second after he'd cut loose his last piton.

'D'Arvit,' he swore, patting his belt for a dart which he knew wouldn't be there.

'Trouble, Commander?' asked Holly, her voice strained from wrestling with the controls.

'No pitons left, and the charges are set.'

There followed a brief silence. Very brief. No time for lengthy think-tanks. Root glanced at his moonometer. Twenty-five seconds and counting.

When Holly's voice came over the headset, it was not bursting with enthusiasm or confidence.

'Er . . . Commander. You wearing any metal?'

'Yes,' replied Root, puzzled. 'My breastplate, buckle, insignia, blaster. Why?'

Holly nudged the shuttle a shade closer. Any nearer was suicide.

'Put it like this. How fond are you of your ribs?'

'Why?'

'I think I know how to get you out of there.'

'How?'

'I could tell you, but you're not going to like it.'

'Tell me, Captain. That's a direct order.'

Holly told him. He didn't like it.

LOS ANGELES

Dwarf gas. Not the most tasteful of subjects; even dwarfs don't like to talk about it. Many a dwarf wife is known to scold her husband for venting gas at home and not leaving it in the tunnels. The fact is that, genetically, dwarfs are prone to gas attacks, especially if they've been eating clay in the mine. A dwarf can take in several kilos of dirt a second through his unhinged jaws. That's a lot of clay, with a lot of air in it. All this waste has to go somewhere. So it goes south. To put it politely, the tunnels are self-sealing.

Mulch hadn't eaten clay in months, but he still had a few bubbles of gas at his disposal when he needed them.

The dogs were poised to attack. Slobber hung in ribbons from their gaping jaws. He would be torn to pieces. Mulch concentrated. The familiar bubbling began in his stomach, pulling it out of shape. It felt as though a couple of gnome garbage wrestlers were going a few rounds in there. The dwarf gritted his teeth, this was going to be a big one.

The handler blew a football whistle. The dogs lunged forward like torpedoes with teeth. Mulch let go with a stream of gas, blowing a hole in the rug and propelling himself to the ceiling, where his thirsty pores anchored him. Safe. For the moment.

The German shepherds were particularly surprised. In their time they had chewed their way through most creatures in the food chain. This was something new. And not altogether pleasant. You have to remember that a dog's nose is far more sensitive than a human one.

The handler blew his whistle a few more times, but any control he might have had disappeared the moment Mulch flew through the air on a jet of recycled wind. As soon as the dogs' nasal passages cleared, they began to leap, teeth gnashing at the apex.

Mulch swallowed. Dogs are smarter than the average goblin. It was only a matter of time before they thought to scale the furniture and make a jump from there.

Mulch made for the window, but the handler was there before him, blocking the hole with his padded body. Mulch noticed him fumbling with a weapon at his belt. This was getting serious. Dwarfs are many things, but bulletproof is not one of them.

To make matters worse, Maggie V appeared at the bedroom door, brandishing a chrome baseball bat. This was not the Maggie V the public was used to. Her face was covered with a green mask, and there appeared to be a tea bag taped under each eye.

'Now we have you, Mister Grouch,' she gloated. 'And suction pads aren't going to save you.'

Mulch realized that his career as the Grouch was over. Whether he escaped or not, the LAPD would be visiting every dwarf in the city come sunrise.

Mulch only had one card left to play. The gift of tongues. Every fairy has a natural grasp of languages, as all tongues are based on Gnommish, if you trace them back far enough. Including American Dog.

'Arf' grunted Mulch. 'Arf, rrruff ruff.'

The dogs froze. One attempted to freeze in mid-leap, landing on his partner. They chewed each other's tails for a moment, then remembered that there was a creature on the ceiling barking at them. His accent was terrible, something mid-European. But it was Dog nevertheless.

'Aroof?' enquired dog number one. 'Whaddya sayin?'

Mulch pointed at the handler. 'Woof arfy arrooof! That human has a big bone inside his shirt,' he grunted. (Obviously, that's been translated.)

The German shepherds pounced on their handler, Mulch scampered through the hole in the window, and Maggie V howled so much that her mask cracked and her tea bags fell off. And even though the Grouch knew that this particular chapter in his career was closed, the weight of Maggie V's Academy Award inside his shirt gave him no little satisfaction.

CHUTE E93

Twenty seconds left before the concussors blew, and the commander was still flattened against the chute wall. They had no wing sets, and no time to get one outside even if they had. If they couldn't pull Root out of there right now, then he'd be blown off the wall and into the abyss. And magic didn't work on melted slop. There was only one option. Holly would have to use the gripper clamps.

All shuttles are equipped with secondary landing gear. If the docking nodes fail, then four magnetic gripper clamps could be blasted from recessed grooves. These clamps will latch on to the metal underside of the landing-bay dock, reeling the shuttle into the airlock. The grippers also came in handy in unfamiliar environments, where the magnets would seek out trace elements and latch on like sucker slugs.

'OK, Julius,' said Holly. 'Don't move a muscle.'

Root paled. Julius. Holly had called him Julius. That was not good.

Ten seconds.

Holly flicked down a small view screen. 'Release forward port docking clamp.'

A grating hum signalled the clamp's release.

The commander's image appeared in the view screen. Even from here he looked worried. Holly centred a cross hair on his chest.

'Captain Short. Are you absolutely sure about this?'

Holly ignored her superior. 'Range fifteen metres. Magnets only.'

'Holly, maybe I could jump. I could make it. I'm sure I could make it.'

Five seconds . . .

'Fire port clamp.'

Six tiny charges ignited around the clamp's base, sending the metal disc rocketing from its socket, trailed by a length of retractable polymer cable.

Root opened his mouth to swear, then the clamp crashed into his chest, driving every

gasp of air from his body. Several somethings cracked.

'Reel it in,' spat Holly into the computer mike, simultaneously peeling across the chute. The commander was dragged behind like an extreme surfer.

Zero seconds. The concussors blew, sending two thousand kilograms of rubble careering into the void. A drop in an ocean of magma.

A minute later, the commander was strapped on a gurney in the Atlantean ambassador's sick bay. It hurt to breathe, but that wasn't going to stop him talking.

'Captain Short!' he rasped. 'What the hell were you thinking? I could have been killed.'

Butler ripped open Root's tunic to survey the damage. 'You could have been. Five more seconds and you were pulp. It's thanks to Holly that you are still alive.'

Holly set the auto-pilot to hover and grabbed a medi-pac from the first-aid box. She crumpled it between her fingers to activate the crystals. Another of Foaly's inventions. Ice packs infused with healing crystals. No substitute for magic, but better than a hug and a kiss.

'Where does it hurt?'

Root coughed. A bloody string splattered his uniform. 'The general bodily area. Coupla ribs gone.'

Holly chewed her lip. She was no doctor and healing was by no means an automatic business. Things could go wrong. Holly knew a vice-captain once who had broken a leg and passed out. He woke up with one foot pointing backwards. Not that Holly hadn't performed some tricky operations before. When Artemis wanted his mother's depression cured, she was in a different time zone. Holly had sent out a strong positive signal, with enough sparks in it to hang around for a few days. A sort of general pick-me-up. Anyone who even visited Fowl Manor for the following week should have gone away whistling.

'Holly,' groaned Root.

'O-OK,' she stammered. 'OK.'

She laid her hands on Root's chest, sending the magic scurrying down her fingers. 'Heal,' she breathed.

The commander's eyes rolled back in his head. The magic was shutting him down for recuperation. Holly laid a medi-pac on the unconscious LEP officer's chest.

'Hold that,' she instructed Artemis. 'Ten minutes only. Otherwise there'll be tissue damage.'

Artemis applied pressure to the pack. His fingers were quickly submerged in a pool of blood. Suddenly the desire to pass a smart remark utterly deserted him. First physical exercise, then actual bodily harm. And now this. These past few days were turning out to be quite educational. He'd almost prefer to be back in St Bartleby's.

Holly returned quickly to the cockpit, panning the external cameras towards the supply tunnel.

Butler squeezed into the co-pilot's chair. 'Well,' he asked. 'What've we got?'

Holly grinned. And for a second her expression reminded the manservant of Artemis Fowl. 'We've got a big hole.'

'Good. Then let's go visit an old friend.'

Holly's thumbs hovered over the thrusters. 'Yes,' she said. 'Let's.'

The Atlantean shuttle disappeared into the supply tunnel faster than a carrot down Foaly's gullet. And for those who don't know, that's pretty fast.

THE CROWLEY HOTEL, BEVERLY HILLS, LOS ANGELES

Mulch made it back to his hotel undetected. Of course, this time he didn't have to scale the walls. It would have been more of a challenge than Maggie V's building. The walls here were brick, very porous. His fingers would have leached the moisture from the stone and lost their suction.

No, this time Mulch used the main foyer. And why wouldn't he? As far as the doorman was concerned, he was Lance Digger, reclusive millionaire. Short, maybe. But short and rich.

'Evening, Art,' said Mulch, saluting the doorman on his way to the lift.

Art peered over the marble-topped desk.

'Ah, Mister Digger, it's you,' he said, slightly puzzled. 'I thought I heard you passing below my sightline only moments ago.'

'Nope,' said Mulch, grinning. 'First time tonight.'

'Hmm. The night wind perhaps.'

'Maybe. You'd think they'd block up the holes in this building. All the rent I'm paying.'

'You would indeed,' agreed Art. Always agree with the tenants, company policy.

Inside the mirrored lift, Mulch used a telescopic pointer to push P for penthouse. For the first few months, he had jumped to reach the button, but that was undignified behaviour for a millionaire. And besides, he was certain that Art could hear the thumping from the security desk.

The mirrored box rose silently, flickering past the floors towards the penthouse. Mulch resisted the urge to take the Academy Award out of his bag. Someone could board the lift. He contented himself with a long drink from a bottle of Irish spring water, the closest to fairy pure it was possible to get. As soon as he had stowed the Oscar he would run a cold bath and give his pores a drink. Otherwise he could wake up in the morning glued to the bed.

Mulch's door was key-coded. A fourteen-number sequence. Nothing like a bit of paranoia to keep you out of prison. Even though the LEP believed that he was dead, Mulch could never quite shake the feeling that one day Julius Root would figure it all out and come looking for him.

The apartment's decor was quite unusual, for a human dwelling. A lot of clay, crumbling rock and water features. More like the inside of a cave than an exclusive Beverly Hills residence.

The northern wall appeared to be a single slab of black marble. Appeared to be. Closer inspection revealed a forty-inch flat-screen television, a DVD slot and a tinted glass pane. Mulch hefted a remote control bigger than his leg, popping the hidden cabinet with another complicated key code. Inside were three rows of Oscars. Mulch placed Maggie V's on a waiting velvet pad.

He wiped an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye. 'I'd like to thank the Academy,' giggled the dwarf.

'Very touching,' said a voice behind him.

Mulch slammed the cabinet door shut, cracking the glass pane.

There was a human youth beside the rockery. In his apartment! The boy's appearance was strange, even by Mud Man standards. He was abnormally pale, raven-haired, slender and dressed in a school uniform that looked as though it had been dragged across two continents.

The hairs on Mulch's chin stiffened. This boy was trouble. Dwarf hair is never wrong.

'Your alarm was amusing,' continued the boy. *It took me several seconds to bypass it.'

Mulch knew he was in trouble then. Human police don't break into people's apartments.

'Who are you, hu . . . boy?'

'I think the question here is, who are you? Are you reclusive millionaire Lance Digger? Are you the notorious Grouch? Or perhaps, as Foaly suspects, you are escaped convict Mulch Diggums?'

Mulch ran, the last vestiges of gas providing him with an extra burst of speed. He had no idea who this Mud Boy was, but if Foaly sent him, then he was a bounty hunter of one kind or another.

The dwarf raced across the sunken lounge, making for his escape route. It was the reason he'd chosen this building. In the early nineteen hundreds a wide-bore chimney had run the length of the multi-storey building. When a central-heating system had been installed in the fifties, the building contractor had simply packed the chute with dirt, topping it off with a seal of concrete. Mulch had smelled the vein of soil the second his estate agent had opened the front door. It had been a simple matter to uncover the old fireplace and chip away the concrete. Voila. Instant tunnel.

Mulch unbuttoned his bum-flap on the run. The strange youth made no attempt to follow him. Why would he? There was nowhere to go.

The dwarf spared a second for a parting shot. 'You'll never take me alive, human. Tell Foaly not to send a Mud Man to do a fairy's job.'

Oh dear, thought Artemis, rubbing his brow. Hollywood had a lot to answer for.

Mulch tore a basket of dried flowers from the fireplace and dived right in. He unhinged his jaw and was quickly submerged in the century-old clay. It was not really to his taste. The minerals and nutrients had long since dried up. Instead, the soil was infused with a hundred years of burnt refuse and tobacco ash. But it was clay nevertheless, and this was what dwarfs were born to do. Mulch felt his anxiety melt away. There wasn't a creature alive that could catch him now. This was his domain.

The dwarf descended rapidly, chewing his way through the storeys. More than one wall collapsed on his way past. Mulch had a feeling that he wouldn't be getting his deposit back, even if he had been around to collect it.

In a little over a minute, Mulch had reached the basement car park. He rehinged, gave his rear-end a shake to dislodge any bubbles of gas, then tumbled through the grate. His specially adapted four-wheel drive was waiting for him. Fuelled up, blacked out and ready to go.

'Suckers,' gloated the dwarf, fishing the keys from a chain around his neck.

Then Captain Holly Short materialized not a metre away. 'Suckers?' she said, powering up her buzz baton.

Mulch considered his options. The basement floor was asphalt. Asphalt was death to dwarfs, sealed up their insides like glue. There appeared to be a man mountain blocking the basement ramp. Mulch had seen that one before in Fowl Manor. That meant the human upstairs must be the infamous Artemis Fowl. Captain Short was dead ahead looking none too merciful. Only one way to go. Back into the flue. Up a couple of storeys, and hide out in another apartment.

Holly grinned. 'Go on, Mulch. I dare you.' And Mulch did, he turned, launching himself back into the chimney, expecting a sharp shock in the rear-end. He was not disappointed. How could Holly miss a target like that?

CHUTE E116, BELOW LOS ANGELES

The Los Angeles shuttle port was sixteen miles south of the city, hidden beneath the holographic projection of a sand dune. Root was waiting for them in the shuttle. He had recovered just enough to crack a grin.

'Well, well,' he grunted, hauling himself off the gurney, a fresh medi-pac strapped across

his ribs. 'If it isn't my favourite reprobate, back from the dead.'

Mulch helped himself to a jar of squid pate from the Atlantean ambassador's personal cooler.

'Why is it, Julius, that you never pay me a social visit? After all, I did save your career back in Ireland. If it hadn't been for me, you never would have known about Fowl's copy of the Book.'

When Root was fuming, as he was now, you could have toasted marshmallows on his cheeks.

'We had a deal, convict. You broke it. And now I'm bringing you in.'

Mulch scooped dollops of pate from the jar with his stubby fingers.

'Could use a little beetle juice,' he commented.

'Enjoy it while you can, Diggums. Because your next meal is going to be pushed through a slot in a door.'

The dwarf settled back in a padded chair. 'Comfortable.'

'I thought so,' agreed Artemis. 'Some form of liquid suspension. Expensive, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Sure beats prison shuttles,' agreed Mulch. 'I remember this one time they caught me selling a Van Gogh to a Texan. I was transported in a shuttle the size of a mouse hole. They had a troll in the next cubicle. Stank something awful.'

Holly grinned. 'That's what the troll said.'

Root knew he was being goaded, but he blew his top anyway. 'Listen to me, convict. I have not travelled all this way to listen to your war stories. So shut your trap before I shut it for you.'

Mulch was unimpressed by the outburst. 'Just out of interest, Julius, why have you travelled all this way? The great Commander Root commandeering an ambassador's shuttle just to apprehend little old me? I don't think so. So, what's going on? And what's with the Mud Men?' He nodded at Butler. 'Especially that one.'

The manservant grinned. 'Remember me, little man? Seems to me I owe you something.'

Mulch swallowed. He had crossed swords with Butler before. It hadn't ended well for the human. Mulch had vented a bowel full of dwarf gas directly at the manservant. Very embarrassing for a bodyguard of his status, not to mention painful.

For the first time Root chortled, even though it stretched his ribs. 'OK, Mulch. You're right. Something is going on. Something important.'

'I thought so. And, as usual, you need me to do your dirty work.' Mulch rubbed his rump. 'Well, assaulting me isn't going to help. You didn't have to buzz me so hard, Captain. That's going to leave a mark.'

Holly cupped a hand around one pointed ear. 'Hey, Mulch, if you listen really hard you can just about make out the sound of nobody giving a hoot. From what I saw, you were living pretty well on LEP gold.'

'That apartment cost me a fortune, you know. The deposit alone was four years of your salary. Did you see the view? Used to belong to some movie director.'

Holly raised an eyebrow. 'Glad to see the money was put to good use. Heaven forbid you should squander it.'

Mulch shrugged. 'Hey, I'm a thief. What did you expect -- I'd start a shelter?'

'No, Mulch, funnily enough I didn't expect that for one second.'

Artemis cleared his throat. 'This reunion is all very touching. But while you're

exchanging witticisms, my father is freezing in the Arctic.'

The dwarf zipped up his suit. 'His father? You want me to rescue Artemis Fowl's father? In the Arctic?' There was real fear in his voice. Dwarfs hated ice almost as much as fire.

Root shook his head. 'I wish it were that simple, and in a few minutes so will you.'

Mulch's beard hairs curled in apprehension. And as his grandmother always said, trust the hair, Mulch, trust the hair.

CHAPTER 12: THE BOYS ARE BACK

OPERATIONS' BOOTH

FOALY was thinking. Always thinking. His mind popped off ideas like corn in a microwave. But he couldn't do anything with them. He couldn't even call up Julius and pester him with his hair-brained schemes. Fowl's laptop seemed to be the centaur's only weapon. It was like trying to fight a troll with a toothpick.

Not that the human computer was without some merit, in an ancient-history kind of a way. The e-mail had already proved useful. Provided there was anybody alive to answer it. There was also a small camera mounted on the lid, for video-conferencing. Something the Mud People had only come up with recently. Until then, humans had communicated purely through text or sound waves. Foaly tutted, barbarians. But this camera was pretty high quality, with several filter options. If the centaur didn't know better, he'd swear someone had been leaking fairy technology.

Foaly swivelled the laptop with his hoof, pointing the camera towards the screens on the wall. Come on, Cudgeon, he thought. Smile for the birdie.

He didn't have long to wait. Within minutes, a com screen flickered into life and Cudgeon appeared, waving a white flag.

'Nice touch,' commented Foaly sarcastically.

'I thought so,' said the elf, waving the pennant theatrically. 'I'm going to need this later.'

Cudgeon pressed a button on the remote control. 'Why don't I show you what's going on outside?'

The windows cleared to reveal several squads of technicians feverishly trying to break the booth's defences. Most were aiming computer sensors at the booth's various interfaces, but some were doing it the old-fashioned way. Whacking the sensors with big hammers. None were having any luck.

Foaly swallowed. He was a rat in a trap. 'Why don't you fill me in on your plan, Briar? Isn't that what the power-crazed villain usually does?'

Cudgeon settled back into his swivel chair. 'Certainly, Foaly. Because this isn't one of your precious human movies. There will be no hero rushing in at the last moment. Short and Root are already dead. As are their human partners. No reprieve, no rescue. Just certain death.'

Foaly knew he should be feeling sadness, but hatred was all he could find.

'Just when things are at their most desperate, I shall instruct Opal to return weapons control to the LEP. The B'wa Kell will be rendered unconscious, and you will be blamed for the entire affair, provided you survive, which I doubt.'

'When the B'wa Kell recover, they will name you.'

Cudgeon wagged a finger. 'Only a handful know I am involved, and I shall take care of

them personally. They have already been summoned to Koboï Labs. I shall join them shortly. The DNA cannons are being calibrated to reject goblin strands. When the time comes I shall activate them, and the entire squadron will be out for the count.'

'And then Opal Koboï becomes your empress, I suppose?'

'Of course,' said Cudgeon aloud. But then he manipulated the remote's keyboard, making certain they were on a secure channel.

'Empress?' he breathed. 'Really, Foaly. Do you think I'd go to all this trouble to share power? Oh no. As soon as this charade is over Miss Koboï will have a tragic accident. Perhaps several tragic accidents.'

Foaly bristled. 'At the risk of sounding clichéd, Briar, you'll never get away with this.'

Cudgeon's finger hovered over the terminate button. 'Well if I don't,' he said pleasantly, 'you won't be alive to gloat this time.' And he was gone, leaving the centaur to sweat it out in the booth. Or so Cudgeon thought.

Foaly reached below the desk to the laptop. 'And cut,' he murmured, pausing the camera. 'Take five, people, that's a wrap.'

CHUTE EII6

Holly clamped the shuttle to the wall of a disused chute.

'We got about thirty minutes. Internal sensors say there's a flare coming up here in half an hour, and no shuttle is built to withstand that kind of heat.'

They gathered in the pressurized lounge to put together a plan.

'We need to break into Koboï Labs and regain control of the LEP weaponry,' said the commander.

Mulch was out of his chair and heading for the door. 'No way, Julius. That place has been upgraded since I was there. I heard they've got DNA-coded cannons.'

Root grabbed the dwarf by the scruff of his neck. 'One, don't call me Julius. And two, you're acting like you have a choice, convict.'

Mulch glared at him. 'I do have a choice, Julius. I can just serve out my sentence in a nice little cell. Putting me in the line of fire is a violation of my civil rights.'

Root's facial tones alternated from pastel pink to turnip purple. 'Civil rights!' he spluttered. 'You're talking to me about civil rights! Isn't that just typical?'

Then, strangely, he calmed down. In fact, he seemed almost happy. Those who were close to the commander knew that when he was happy, somebody else was about to be extremely sad.

'What?' asked Mulch suspiciously.

Root lit one of his noxious fungus cigars. 'Oh, nothing. Just that you're right, that's all.'

The dwarf squinted. 'I'm right? You're saying, in front of witnesses, that I'm right.'

'Certainly you are. Putting you in the line of fire would violate every right in the book. So, instead of cutting you the fantastic deal that I was about to offer, I'm going to add a couple of centuries to your sentence and throw you in maximum security.' Root paused, blowing a cloud of smoke at Mulch's face. 'In Howler's Peak.'

Mulch paled beneath the mud caking his cheeks. 'Howler's Peak? But that's a . . .'

'A goblin prison,' completed the commander. 'I know. But for an obvious escape risk such as yourself, I don't think I'd have any trouble convincing the board to make an exception.'

Mulch dropped into the padded gyro chair. This wasn't good. The last time he'd been in a

cell with goblins, it hadn't been any fun. And that had been in Police Plaza. He wouldn't last a week in general population.

'So what was this deal?'

Artemis smiled, fascinated: Commander Root was smarter than he looked. Then again, it would be almost impossible not to be.

'Oh, now you're interested?'

'I might be. No promises, mind.'

'OK, here it is. One-time offer. Don't even bother bargaining. You get us into Koboï Labs and I give you a two-day head start when this is over.'

Mulch swallowed. That was a good offer. They must be in a whole lot of trouble.

POLICE PLAZA

Things were hotting up at Police Plaza. The monsters were at the door. Literally. Captain Kelp was running between stations, trying to reassure his men.

'Don't worry, people, they can't get through those doors with Softnoses. Nothing less than some kind of missile --'

At that moment, a tremendous force buckled the main doors, like a child blowing up a paper bag. They held. Barely.

Cudgeon came rushing out of the tactical room, his commander's acorns glinting on his breast. With his reinstatement by the Council, he had made history by becoming the only commander in the LEP to have been appointed twice.

'What was that?'

Trouble brought up a front view on the monitors. A goblin stood with a large tube on his shoulder.

'Bazooka of some kind. I think it's one of the old wide-bore Softnose cannons.'

Cudgeon smacked his own forehead. 'Don't tell me. They were all supposed to have been destroyed. A curse on that centaur! How did he manage to sneak all that hardware out from under my nose?'

'Don't be too hard on yourself,' said Trouble. 'He fooled all of us.'

'How much more of that can we stand?'

Trouble shrugged. 'Not much. A couple more hits. Maybe they only had one missile.'

Famous last words. The doorway shook a second time; large chunks of masonry tumbled from the marble pillars.

Trouble picked himself off the ground, magic zipping a gash on his forehead. 'Paramedics, check for casualties. Have we got those weapons charged yet?'

Grub hobbled over, hampered by the weight of two electric rifles. 'Ready to go, Captain. Thirty-two weapons. Twenty pulses each.'

'OK. Best marks-fairies only. Not one shot fired until I give the word.'

Grub nodded, his face grim and pale.

'Good, Corporal, now move it out.'

When his brother was out of earshot, Trouble spoke quietly to Commander Cudgeon. 'I don't know what to tell you, Commander. They blew the Atlantis tunnel, so there's no help coming from there. We can't get a pentagram around them to stop time. We're completely surrounded, outnumbered and outgunned. If the B'wa Kell breaches the blast doors, it will be over in seconds. We have to get into that Operations' booth. Any progress?'

Cudgeon shook his head. 'The techies are working on it. We have sensors pointed at every centimetre of the surface. If we hit on the access code, it will be blind luck.'

Trouble rubbed the tiredness from his eyes. 'I need time. There must be a way to stall them.'

Cudgeon drew a white flag from inside his tunic. 'There is a way

'Commander! You can't go out there. It's suicide.'

'Perhaps,' admitted the commander. 'But if I don't go, we could all be dead in a matter of minutes. At least this way, we'll have a few minutes to work on the Operations' booth.'

Trouble considered it. There was no other way. 'What have you got to bargain with?'

'The prisoners in Howler's Peak. Maybe we could negotiate some kind of controlled release.'

'The Council will never go for that.'

Cudgeon drew himself up to his full height. 'This is not a time for politics, Captain. This is a time for action.'

Trouble was, quite frankly, amazed. This was not the same Briar Cudgeon he knew. Someone had given this fairy a spine transplant.

Now the newly appointed commander was going to earn that acorn cluster on his lapel. Trouble felt an emotion well up in his chest. One that he'd never before associated with Briar Cudgeon. It was respect.

'Open the front door a crack,' ordered the commander in steely tones. Foaly would be just loving this on camera. 'I'm going out to talk to these reptiles.'

Trouble relayed the command. If they ever got out of this, he would see to it that Commander Cudgeon was awarded a posthumous Golden Acorn. At the very least.

UNCHARTED CHUTE, BELOW KOBOI LABORATORIES

The Atlantean shuttle sped down a vast chute, sticking tightly to the walls. Close enough to scrape paint from the hull.

Artemis poked his head through from the passenger bay.

'Is this really necessary, Captain?' he asked, as they avoided death by a centimetre for the umpteenth time. 'Or is it just more fly-boy grandstanding?'

Holly winked. 'Do I look like a fly boy to you, Fowl?'

Artemis had to admit that she didn't. Captain Short was extremely pretty in a dangerous sort of way. Black-widow pretty. Artemis was expecting puberty to hit in approximately eight months, and he suspected that at that point he would look at Holly in a different light. It was probably just as well that she was eighty years old.

'I'm hugging the surface to search for this alleged crack that Mulch insists is along here,' Holly explained.

Artemis nodded. The dwarf's theory. Just incredible enough to be true. He returned to the aft bay for Mulch's version of a briefing.

The dwarf had drawn a crude diagram on a backlit wall panel. In fairness, there were more artistic chimpanzees. And less pungent ones. Mulch was using a carrot as a pointer -- or, more accurately, several carrots. Dwarfs liked carrots.

'This is Koboi Labs,' he mumbled around a mouthful of vegetable.

'That?' exclaimed Root.

'I realize, Julius, that it is not an accurate schematic.'

The commander exploded from his chair. If you didn't know better, you'd swear there was dwarf gas involved. 'An accurate schematic? It's a rectangle, for heaven's sake!'

Mulch was unperturbed. 'That's not important. This is the important bit.'

'That wobbly line?'

'It's a fissure,' protested the dwarf. 'Anybody can see that.'

'Anybody in kindergarten, maybe. So it's a fissure, so what?'

'This is the clever bit. Y'see, that fissure is not usually there.'

Root began strangling the air again. Something he was doing more and more lately. But Artemis was suddenly interested.

'When does the fissure appear?'

But Mulch wasn't just going to give a straight answer. 'Us dwarfs. We know something about rocks. Been digging around 'em for ages.' Root's fingers began beating a tattoo on his buzz baton. 'What fairies don't realize is that rocks are alive. They breathe.'

Artemis nodded. 'Of course. Heat expansion.'

Mulch bit the carrot triumphantly. 'Exactly. And, of course, the opposite. They contract when they cool down.' Even Root was listening now. 'Koboi Labs is built on solid mantle. Three miles of rock. No way in, short of sonix warheads. And I think Opal Koboi might notice them.'

'And that helps us how?'

'A crack opens up in that rock when it cools down. I worked on the foundations when they were building this place. Gets you right in under the labs. Still a way to go, but at least you're in.'

The commander was sceptical. 'So how come Opal Koboi hasn't noticed this gaping fissure?'

'Oh, I wouldn't say it was gaping.'

'How big?'

Mulch shrugged. 'Dunno. Maybe five metres. At its widest point.'

'That's still a pretty big fissure to be sitting there all I day.'

'Only it's not there all day,' interrupted Artemis. 'Is it, Mulch?'

'All day? I wish. I'd say, at a guess, this is only an approximation mind . . .'

Root was losing his cool. Being one step behind all the time didn't agree with him.

'Tell me, convict, before I add another scorch mark to your behind!'

Mulch was injured. 'Stop shouting, Julius, you're curling my beard.'

Root opened the cooler, letting the icy tendrils play over his face.

'OK, Mulch. How long?'

'Three minutes max. Last time I did it with a set of wings, wearing a pressure suit. Nearly got crushed and fried.'

'Fried?'

'Let me guess,' said Artemis. 'The fissure only opens when the rock has contracted sufficiently. If this fissure is on a chute wall, then the coolest time would be moments before the next flare.'

Mulch winked. 'Smart, Mud Boy. If the rocks don't get you, the magma will.'

Holly's voice crackled over the com speakers. 'I've got a visual on something. Could be a shadow, or it could just be a crack in the chute wall.'

Mulch did a little dance, looking very pleased with himself. Now, Julius, you can say it. I was right again! You owe me, Julius, you owe me.'

The commander rubbed the bridge of his nose. If he made it through this alive, he was

never leaving the station again.

KOBOI LABORATORIES

Koboi Labs was surrounded by a ring of B'wa Kell goblins. Armed to the teeth, tongues hanging out for blood. Cudgeon was hustled past roughly, prodded by a dozen barrels. The DNA cannons hung inoperative in their towers, for the moment. The second Cudgeon felt the B'wa Kell had outlived its usefulness, then the guns would be reactivated.

The commander was taken to the inner sanctum, and forced to his knees before Opal and the B'wa Kell generals. Once the soldiers had been dismissed, Cudgeon was back on his feet and in command.

'Everything proceeds according to plan,' he announced, crossing to stroke Opal's cheek. 'In an hour Haven will be ours.'

General Scalene was not convinced. 'It would be ours a lot faster if we had some Koboi blasters.'

Cudgeon sighed patiently. 'We've been through this, General. The disruption signal knocks out all neutrino weapons. If you get blasters, so will the LEP.'

Scalene shuffled into a corner, licking his eyeballs.

Of course, that was not the only reason for denying the goblins neutrino weapons. Cudgeon had no intention of arming a group he intended to betray. As soon as the B'wa Kell had disposed of the Council, Opal would return power to the LEP.

'How are things proceeding?'

Opal swivelled in her Hoverboy, legs curled beneath her. 'Deliciously. The main doors fell moments after you left to . . . negotiate.'

Cudgeon grinned. 'Good thing I left. I might have been injured.'

'Captain Kelp has pulled his remaining forces into the Operations' room, ringing the booth. The Council is in there too.'

'Perfect,' said Cudgeon.

Another B'wa Kell general, Sputa, banged the conference table. 'No, Cudgeon. Far from perfect. Our brothers are wasting away in Howler's Peak.'

'Patience, General Sputa,' said Cudgeon soothingly, actually laying a hand on the goblin's shoulder. 'As soon as Police Plaza falls, we can open the cells in Howler's Peak without resistance.'

Internally Cudgeon fumed. These idiot creatures. How he detested them. Clothed in robes fashioned from their own cast-off skin. Repulsive. Cudgeon longed to reactivate the DNA cannons and stop their jabbering for a few sweet hours.

He caught Opal's eye. She knew what he was thinking. Her tiny teeth showed in anticipation. What a delightfully vicious creature. Which was, of course, why she had to be disposed of. Opal Koboi could never be happy as second in command.

He dropped her a wink.

'Soon,' he mouthed silently. 'Soon.'

CHAPTER 13: INTO THE BREACH

BELOW KOBOI LABORATORIES

AN LEP shuttle is shaped like a teardrop, bottom heavy with thrusters and a nose that could cut through steel. Of course our heroes weren't in an LEP shuttle, they were in the ambassador's luxury cruiser. Comfort was definitely favoured over speed. It had a nose like a gnome's behind. Bulky and expensive-looking, with a grill you could use to barbecue buffalo.

'So, you're saying this fissure is going to open up for a couple of minutes and I have to fly through. And that's the entire plan?' said Holly.

'It's the best we've got,' said Root glumly. 'Well, at least we'll be in padded seats when we get squashed. This thing handles like a three-legged rhinoceros.'

'How was I to know?' grumbled Root. 'This was supposed to be a routine run. This shuttle has an excellent stereo.'

Butler raised his hand. 'Listen. What's that sound?'

They listened. The noise came from below them, like a giant clearing its throat.

Holly consulted the keel cams.

'Flare,' she announced. 'Big sucker. It'll be roasting our tail feathers any minute.'

The rock face before them cracked and groaned in constant expansion and retraction.

Fissures heaved like grinning mouths lined with black teeth.

'That's it. Let's go,' urged Mulch. 'That fissure is going to seal up faster than a stink worm's --'

'Not enough room yet,' snapped Holly. 'This is a shuttle, not one fat dwarf riding stolen wings.'

Mulch was too scared to be insulted. 'Just move it. It'll widen as we go.'

Generally Holly would have waited for Root to give the green light. But this was her area. No one was going to argue with Captain Holly Short at the controls of a shuttle.

The chasm shuddered open another metre.

Holly gritted her teeth. 'Hold on to your ears,' she said, ramming the thrusters to maximum.

The craft's occupants clutched their armrests, and more than one of them closed their eyes. But not Artemis. He couldn't. There was something morbidly fascinating about flying into an uncharted tunnel at a reckless speed, with only a kleptomaniac dwarf's word for what lay at the other end.

Holly concentrated on her instruments. Hull cameras and sensors fed information to various screens and speakers. Sonar was going crazy, beeping so fast it was almost a continuous whine. Fixed halogen headlights fed frightening images to the monitors, and laser radar drew a green 3D line picture on a dark screen. Then, of course, there was the quartz windscreen. But with sheets of rock dust and larger debris, the naked eye was next to useless.

'Temperature increasing,' she muttered, glancing at the rear-view monitor. An orange magma column blasted past the fissure mouth, spilling over into the tunnel.

They were in a desperate race. The fissure was closing behind them and expanding before the craft's prow. The noise was terrific. Thunder in a bubble.

Mulch covered his ears. 'Next time, I'll take Howler's Peak.'

'Quiet, convict,' growled Root. 'This was all your idea.'

Their arguing was interrupted by a tremendous grating, sending sparks dancing across the windscreen.

'Sorry,' apologized Captain Short. 'There goes our communications array.'

She flipped the craft sideways, scraping between two shifting plates. The magma's heat coated the rock face, dragging the plates together. A jagged edge clipped the shuttle's rear as the plates crashed behind them. A giant's handclap. Butler held his Sig Sauer. It was a comfort thing.

Then they were through, spiralling into a cavern towards three enormous titanium rods.

'There,' gasped Mulch. 'The foundation rods.'

Holly rolled her eyes. 'You don't say,' she groaned, firing the docking clamps.

Mulch had drawn another diagram. This one looked like a bendy snake.

'We're being led by an idiot with a crayon,' said Root, with deceptive calmness.

'I got you this far, didn't I, Julius?' said Mulch, pouting.

Holly was finishing the last bottle of mineral water. A good third of it went over her head.

'Don't you dare start sulking, dwarf,' she said. 'As far as I can see, we're stuck in the centre of the Earth, with no way out and no communications.'

Mulch backed up a step. 'I can see you're a bit tense after the flight. Let's all calm down now, shall we?'

Nobody looked very calm. Even Artemis seemed slightly shaken by the ordeal. Butler still hadn't let go of the Sig Sauer.

'That's the hard bit over. We're in the foundations now. The only way is up.'

'Oh really, convict?' said Root. 'And how do you suggest we go up exactly?'

Mulch plucked a carrot from the cooler, waving it at his diagram. 'This here is . . .'

'A snake?'

'No, Julius. It's one of the foundation rods.'

'The solid titanium foundation rods, sunk in impregnable bedrock?'

'The very ones. Except one isn't exactly solid.'

Artemis nodded. 'I thought so. You cut corners on this work, didn't you, Mulch?'

Mulch was unrepentant. 'You know what building regulations are like. Solid titanium pillars? Do you have any idea how expensive that is? Threw our estimate right off. So me 'n' cousin Nord decided to forget the titanium packing.'

'But you had to fill that column with something,' interrupted the commander. 'Koboi would have run scans.'

Mulch nodded guiltily.

'We hooked up the sewage pipes to it for a couple of days. The sonographs came up clean.'

Holly felt her throat clench. 'Sewage. You mean . . .'

'No. Not any more. That was a hundred years ago, it's just clay now. Very good clay as it happens.'

Root's face could have boiled a large cauldron of water.

'You expect us to climb through twenty metres of . . . manure?'

The dwarf shrugged. 'Hey, do I care? Stay here forever if you want, I'm going up the pipe.'

Artemis did not like this sudden turn of events. Running, jumping, injury. OK. But sewage? 'This is your plan?' he managed to mutter.

'What's the matter, Mud Boy,' smirked Mulch. 'Afraid of getting your hands dirty?'

It was only a figure of speech, Artemis knew. But true nevertheless. He glanced at his slender fingers. Yesterday morning they were pianist's fingers with manicured nails. Today they could have belonged to a builder.

Holly clapped Artemis on the shoulder. 'OK,' she declared. 'Let's do it. As soon as we save the Lower Elements, we can get back to rescuing your father.'

Holly noticed a change in Artemis's face. Almost as if his features weren't sure how to arrange themselves. She paused, realizing what she had said. For her, the remark had been a casual encouragement, the kind of thing an officer said every day. But it seemed as though Artemis was not accustomed to being a member of a team.

'Don't think I'm getting chummy or anything. It's just that when I give my word, I stick to it.'

Artemis decided not to respond. He'd already been punched once today.

*

They descended from the shuttle on a folding stairway.

Artemis stepped on to the surface, picking his way through the jagged stones and construction debris abandoned by Mulch and his cousin a century earlier. The cavern was lit by the star-like twinkle of rock phosphorescence.

'This place is a geological marvel,' he exclaimed. 'The pressure at this depth should be crushing us, but it isn't.' He knelt to examine a fungus sprouting from a rusting paint tin. 'There's even life.'

Mulch wrenched the remains of a hammer from between two rocks.

'So that's where this got to. We overdid it a bit on the explosives, blasting the shaft for these columns. Some of our waste must have . . . fallen down here.'

Holly was appalled. Pollution is an abomination to the People.

'You've broken so many laws here, Mulch, I don't even have the fingers to count them. When you get that two-day head start, you better move fast, because I'm going to be the one chasing you.'

'Here we are,' said Mulch, ignoring the threat. When you'd heard as many as he had, they just rolled right off.

There was a hole bored into one of the columns. Mulch rubbed the edges fondly.

'Diamond laser cutter. Little nuclear battery. That baby could cut through anything.'

'I remember that cutter too,' said Root. 'You nearly decapitated me with it once.'

Mulch sighed. 'Happy days, eh, Julius?'

Root's reply was a swift kick in the behind. 'Less talk, more eating dirt, convict.'

Holly placed her hand into the hole. 'Air currents. The pressure field from the city must have equalized this cave over the years. That's why we're not flat as manta rays right now.'

'I see,' said Butler and Root simultaneously. Another lie for the list.

Mulch undid his bum-flap.

'I'll tunnel up to the top and wait for you there. Clear as much of the debris as you can. I'll spread the recycled mud around, to avoid closing up the shaft.'

Artemis groaned. The idea of crawling through Mulch's recyclings was almost intolerable. Only the thought of his father kept him going.

Mulch stepped into the shaft. 'Stand back,' he warned, unhinging his jaw.

Butler moved quickly -- he was not about to get nailed by dwarf gas again.

Mulch disappeared up to his waist in the titanium column. In moments he had

disappeared entirely. The pipe began to shudder with strange, unappetizing sounds. Chunks of clay clattered against the metal walls. A constant stream of condensed air and debris spiralled from the hole.

'Amazing,' breathed Artemis. 'What I could do with ten like him. Fort Knox would be a pushover.'

'Don't even think about it,' warned Root. He turned to Butler. 'What have we got?'

The manservant drew his pistol. 'One Sig Sauer handgun with twelve rounds in the magazine. That's it. I'll take the gun, as I'm the only one who can lift it. You two pick up whatever you can on the run.'

'And what about me?' asked Artemis, even though he knew what was coming.

Butler looked his master straight in the eye. 'I want you to stay here. This is a military operation. All you can do is get yourself killed.'

'But. . .'

'My job is to protect you, Artemis, and this is quite possibly the safest spot on the planet.'

Artemis didn't argue. In truth, these facts had already occurred to him. Sometimes being a genius was a burden.

'Very well, Butler. I shall remain here. Unless . . .'

Butler's eyes narrowed. 'Unless what?'

Artemis gave a dangerous smile. 'Unless I have an idea.'

POLICE PLAZA

In Police Plaza the situation was desperate. Captain Kelp had pulled the remaining forces into a circle behind overturned workstations. The goblins were taking pot shots through the doorway, and none of the warlocks had a drop of magic left in them. Anyone who got injured from now on, stayed injured.

The Council was huddled behind a wall of troops. All except Wing Commander Vinyaya, who had demanded to be given one of the electric rifles. She hadn't missed yet.

The techs were crouched behind their desks, trying every code combination in the book to gain access to the Operations' booth. Trouble didn't hold out much hope on that front. If Foaly locked a door then it stayed locked.

Meanwhile, inside the booth, all the centaur could do was pound his fists in frustration. It was a sign of Cudgeon's cruelty that he allowed Foaly to view the battle beyond the blast windows.

It seemed hopeless. Even if Julius and Holly had received his message, it was too late now to do anything. Foaly's lips and throat were dry. Everything had deserted him. His computer, his intellect, his glib sarcasm. Everything.

BELOW KOBOI LABORATORIES

Something wet slapped Butler in the head.

'What was that?' he hissed at Holly, who was bringing up the rear.

'Don't ask,' croaked Captain Short. Even through her helmet filters the smell was foul.

The contents of the column had had a century to ferment, and smelled as toxic as the day it went in. Probably worse. At least, thought the bodyguard, I don't have to eat this stuff.

Root was on point, his helmet lights cutting swathes through the darkness. The pillar was

on a forty-degree angle, with regular grooves that were intended to anchor the titanium block filling.

Mulch had done a sterling job of breaking down the pipe's contents. But the recycling had to go somewhere. Mulch, in fairness to him, chewed every mouthful thoroughly to avoid too many lumps.

The raiding party struggled on grimly, trying not to think about what they were actually doing. By the time they caught up with the dwarf, he was clinging to a ridge, face constricted in pain.

'What is it, Mulch?' asked Root, concern accidentally slipping into his tones.

'Geddup,' Mulch groaned. 'Geddup rih now.'

Root's eyes widened with something approaching panic. 'Up!' he hissed. 'Everybody up!'

They scrambled into the tight wedge of space above the dwarf. Not a second too soon. Mulch relaxed, releasing a burst of dwarf gas that could have inflated a circus tent. He rehinged his jaw.

'That's better,' he sighed. 'Lotta air in that soil. Now would you mind getting that beam out of my face. You know how I feel about light.'

The commander obliged, switching to infra-red.

'OK, now we're up here, how do we get out? You didn't bring your cutter, I seem to remember.'

The dwarf grinned. 'No problem. A good thief always plans on a return visit. See here.' Mulch was pointing to an area of titanium that seemed exactly like the rest of the pipe. 'I patched this up last time. It's just flexi-bond.'

Root had to smile. 'You are a cunning reprobate. How did we ever catch you?'

'Luck,' replied the dwarf, elbowing a section of the pipe. A large circle popped out, revealing the hundred-year-old hole. 'Welcome to Koboï Labs.'

They clambered into a dimly lit corridor. Loaded hover trolleys were stacked four deep around the walls. Strip lighting operated with minimum illumination overhead.

'I know this place,' noted Root. 'I've been here before on inspection for the special-weapons permits. We're two corridors across from the computer centre. We have a real chance of making it.'

'What about these DNA stun cannons?' enquired Butler.

'Tricky,' admitted the commander. 'If the cannon's onboard doesn't recognize you, you're dead. They can be programmed to reject entire species.'

'Tricky,' agreed the manservant.

'I'm betting they're not active,' continued Root. 'First, if this place is crawling with goblins, they hardly came in through the front door. And second, if Foaly is being blamed for this little uprising, Koboï will want to pretend they had no weapons, just like the LEP.'

'Strategy?' asked Butler.

'Not much,' admitted the commander. 'Once we turn the corner, we're on camera. So down the corridor as fast as you can, hit anything that gets in your way. If it has a weapon, confiscate it. Mulch, you stay here and widen the tunnel, we may need to get out fast. Ready?'

Holly extended a hand. 'Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure.'

The commander and manservant laid their hands on hers. 'Likewise.'

They headed down the corridor. Two hundred goblins versus our three virtually unarmed heroes. It was going to be close.

INNER SANCTUM, KOBOI LABORATORIES

'Intruders,' squealed Opal Koboi delightedly. 'Inside the building.'

Cudgeon crossed to the surveillance plasma screen.

'I do believe it's Julius. Amazing. Obviously your hit team was exaggerating, General Sputa.'

Sputa licked his eyeballs furiously. Lieutenant Nyle would be losing his skin before shedding season.

Cudgeon whispered into Opal's ear. 'Can we activate the DNA cannons?'

The pixie shook her head. 'Not immediately. They've been reprogrammed to reject goblin DNA. It would take a few minutes.'

Cudgeon turned to the four goblin generals. 'Have an armoured squad come up behind and another one from the flank. We can trap them at the door. There will be no way out.'

Cudgeon stared raptly at the plasma screen. 'This is even better than I'd planned. Now, my old friend, Julius, it's my turn to humiliate you.'

Artemis was meditating. This was a time for concentration. He sat cross-legged on a rock, visualizing the various rescue strategies that could be utilized when they returned to the Arctic. If the Mafiya managed to set up the drop before Artemis could reach them, then there was only one plan that could work. And it was a high-risk plan. Artemis searched deeper inside his brain. There must be another way.

He was disturbed by an orchestral noise emanating from the titanium column. It sounded like a sustained note on a bassoon. Dwarf gas, he reasoned. The column had decent acoustics.

What he needed was a brainwave. One crystal thought that would slice through this mire he had become embroiled in, and save the day.

After eight minutes, he was interrupted again. Not gas this time. A cry for help. Mulch was in trouble, and in pain.

Artemis was about to suggest that Butler deal with it when he realized that his bodyguard wasn't there. Off on his mission to save the Lower Elements. It was up to him.

He poked his head into the column. It was black as the inside of an old boot, and twice as pungent. Artemis decided that an LEP helmet was his first requirement. He quickly retrieved a spare from the shuttle and, after a moment's experimentation, activated the lights and seals.

'Mulch? Are you up there?'

No reply. Could this be a trap? Was it possible that he, Artemis Fowl, was about to fall for the oldest ruse in the book? Entirely possible, he decided. But in spite of that, he couldn't really afford to take chances with that hairy little creature's life. Somewhere since Los Angeles, and against his better judgement, he had bonded with Mister Diggums. Artemis shuddered. It was happening more and more since his mother's return to sanity.

Artemis climbed into the tube, beginning his journey to the disc of light above. The smell was horrendous. His shoes were ruined, and no amount of dry-cleaning could redeem the St Bartleby's blazer. Mulch had better be in a lot of pain.

When he reached the entrance, he found Mulch writhing on the floor, face contorted in genuine agony.

'What is it?' he asked, peeling off the helmet and kneeling by the dwarf's side.

'Blockage in my gut,' grunted the dwarf, beads of sweat sliding down his beard hairs. 'Something hard. Can't break it down.'

'What can I do?' Artemis asked, though he dreaded the possible replies.

'My left boot. Take it off.'

'Your boot? Did you say boot?'

'Yes,' howled the dwarf, pain stiffening his entire torso. 'Get it off!'

Artemis couldn't stifle a relieved sigh. He'd been fearing much worse. He hefted the dwarf's leg into his lap and pulled at the climbing boot.

'Nice boots,' he commented.

'-Rodeo Drive,' gasped Mulch. 'Now, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Sorry.'

The boot slid off, revealing a not-quite-so-designer sock, complete with toe holes and darn patches.

'Little toe,' said Mulch, eyes closed with pain.

'Little toe what?'

'Squeeze the joint. Hard.'

Squeeze the joint. Must be a reflexology thing. Every part of the body corresponds to an area of the foot. The body's keyboard, so to speak. Practised in the Orient for centuries.

'Very well. If you insist.'

Artemis placed his finger and thumb around Mulch's hairy toe. It could have been his imagination, but it seemed that the hairs parted to allow him access.

'Squeeze,' gasped the dwarf. 'Why aren't you squeezing?'

Artemis wasn't squeezing because his eyes were crossed, looking at the laser barrel in the middle of his forehead.

Lieutenant Nyle, who was holding the weapon, couldn't believe his luck. He'd single-handedly captured two intruders, plus he'd discovered their bolt hole. Who said hanging back to avoid the fighting didn't have advantages? This was turning out to be an exceptional revolution for him. He'd be colonel before shedding his third skin.

'On your feet,' he ordered, panting blue flames. Even through the translator it sounded reptilian.

Artemis stood slowly, lifting Mulch's leg with him. The dwarf's bum-flap flopped open.

'What's wrong with him anyway?' asked Nyle, bending in for a closer look.

'Something he ate,' said Artemis, and squeezed the joint.

The resulting explosion knocked the goblin off his feet, sending him tumbling down the corridor. There was something you didn't see every day.

Mulch hopped to his feet.

'Thanks, kid. I thought I was a goner there. Must've been something hard. Granite maybe, or diamond.'

Artemis nodded. Not ready for words.

'Those goblins are dumb. Did you see the look on his face?'

Artemis shook his head. Still not ready.

'Do you want to go look?'

The tactless humour snapped Artemis out of his daze. 'That goblin. I doubt he was on his own.'

Mulch buttoned up his bum-flap. 'Nope. A whole squadron of 'em just went past. This guy must have been trying to avoid the action. Typical goblin.'

Artemis rubbed his temples. There must be something he could do to help his friends. He had the highest tested IQ in Europe, for heaven's sake.

'Mulch, I have an important question for you.'

'I suppose I owe you one, for saving my hide.'

Artemis draped an arm around the dwarf's shoulder. 'I know how you got into Kobo Labs. But you couldn't go back that way, the flare would get you. So, how did you get out?'

Mulch grinned. 'Simple. I activated the alarm, then left in the LEP uniform I came in.'

Artemis scowled. 'No use, there must be another way. There has to be.'

The DNA cannons were obviously out of commission. Root was just starting to feel optimistic when he heard the thunder of approaching boots.

'D'Arvit. Rumbled. You two keep going. I'll hold them here as long as I can.'

'No, Commander,' said Butler. 'With respect, we only have one weapon, and I can hit a lot more with it than you. I'll take them coming around the corner. You try to get the door open.'

Holly opened her mouth to argue. But who was going to argue with a man that size?

'OK. Good luck. If you're wounded, lie as still as you can until I get back. Four minutes, remember.'

Butler nodded. 'I remember.'

'And, Butler?'

'Yes, Captain?'

'That little misunderstanding last year. When you and Artemis kidnapped me.'

Butler gazed at the ceiling. He would have stared at his shoes, but Holly was in the way. 'Yes, that. I've been meaning to talk to . . .'

'Just forget it. After this, all square.'

'Holly, move it out,' ordered Root. 'Butler, don't let them get too close.'

Butler wrapped his fingers around the gun's moulded grip. He looked like an armed bear. 'They better not. For their sake.'

Artemis climbed up on a hover trolley, tapping one of the overhead conduits that ran the length of the corridor.

'This pipe appears to run along the entire ceiling structure. What is it, a ventilation system?'

Mulch snorted. 'I wish. It's the plasma supply for the DNA cannons.'

'So why didn't you come in this way?'

'Oh, a little matter of there being enough charge in every drop of plasma to fry a troll.'

Artemis placed his palm against the metal. 'What if the cannons weren't operational?'

'Once the cannons are deactivated, the plasma is just so much radioactive slop.'

'Radioactive?'

Mulch tugged at his beard thoughtfully. 'Actually, Julius reckons the cannons have been turned off.'

'Any way to be certain?'

'We could open this unopenable panel.' Mulch ran his fingers along the curved surface. 'Ahh, see here. A micro-keyhole. To service the cannons. Even plasma needs recharging.' He pointed to a tiny hole in the metal. It could have been a speck of dirt. 'Now, observe a master at work.'

The dwarf fed one of his chin hairs into the hole. When the tip reappeared, Mulch plucked the hair out by the root. The hair died as soon as Mulch plucked it, stiffening in rigor mortis and retaining the precise shape of the lock's interior.

Mulch held his breath, twisting the makeshift key. The hatch dropped open.

'That, my boy, is talent.'

Inside the pipe, an orange jelly pulsed gently. Occasional sparks roiled in its depths. The

plasma was too dense even to spill from the hatch, and hung on to its cylindrical shape.

Mulch squinted through the wobbling gel. 'Deactivated all right. If that stuff were live, our faces would be getting a nice tan about now.'

'What about those sparks?'

'Residual charge. They'd give you a bit of a tingle, but nothing serious.'

Artemis nodded. 'Right,' he said, strapping on the helmet.

Mulch blanched. 'You are not serious, MudWhelp? Do you have any idea what will happen if those cannons are activated?'

'I'm trying not to think about it.'

'It's probably just as well.' The dwarf shook his head, bewildered. 'OK. You've got thirty metres to go, and no more than ten minutes of air in that helmet. Keep the filters closed. The air may get a bit stale after a while, but it's better than sucking plasma. And here, take this.' He plucked the stiffened hair from the keyhole.

'What for?'

'I presume you will want to get out again at the other end. Or hadn't you thought of that, genius boy?'

Artemis swallowed. He hadn't. There was more to this heroism thing than rushing in blindly.

'Just feed it in gently. Remember, it's hair not metal.'

'Feed it in gently. Got it.'

'And don't use any lights. Halogen could reactivate the plasma.'

Artemis felt his head beginning to spin.

'And make sure you get foamed as soon as you can. The anti-rad canisters are blue. They're everywhere in this facility.'

'Blue canisters. Anything else, Mister Diggums?'

'Well, there are the plasma snakes'

Artemis's knees almost collapsed. 'You're not serious?'

'No,' Mulch conceded. 'I'm not. Now, your reach is about half a metre. So calculate for sixty pulls and then get out of there.'

'Slightly under half a metre I'd say. Perhaps sixty-three pulls.' He placed the dwarf hair inside his breast pocket.

Mulch shrugged. 'Whatever, kid. It's your skin. Now in you go.'

The dwarf interlaced his fingers and Artemis stepped into the makeshift stirrup. He was considering changing his mind when Mister Diggums heaved him into the pipe. The orange gel sucked him in, enveloping his body in a second.

The plasma coiled around him like a living being, popping bubbles of air trapped in his clothing. A residual spark brushed his leg, sending sharp pain spasming through his body. A bit of a tingle?

Artemis gazed out through the orange gel. Mulch was there giving him the thumbs up. Grinning like a loon. Artemis decided that if he made it through this, then he would have to place the dwarf on the payroll.

He began to crawl blindly. One pull, two pulls . . .

Sixty-three seemed a long way off.

Butler cocked the Sig Sauer. The footsteps were ear-splitting now, bouncing off the metal walls. Shadows stretched around the corner, ahead of their owners. The manservant took approximate aim.

A head appeared. Froglike. Licking its own eyeballs. Butler pulled the trigger. The slug punched a melon-sized hole in the wall above the goblin's head. The head was hurriedly withdrawn. Of course, Butler had missed on purpose. Scared was always better than dead. But it couldn't last forever. Twelve more shots to be precise.

The goblins grew braver, sneaking out further and further. Eventually, Butler knew he would be forced to shoot one.

The manservant decided that it was time to go close-quarters. He rose from his hunkers, making slightly less noise than a panther, and hurtled down the corridor towards the enemy.

There were only two men on the planet better educated in the various martial arts than Butler, and he was related to one of them. The other lived on an island in the South China Seas and spent his days meditating and beating up palm trees. You really had to feel sorry for those goblins.

The B'wa Kell had two guards on the sanctum door. Both armed to the teeth and both as thick as several short planks. In spite of repeated warnings, they were both falling asleep inside their helmets when the elves came running around the corner.

'Look,' mumbled one. 'Elves.'

'Huh?' said the other, the denser of the two.

'Don't matter,' said number one. 'LEP don't got no guns.'

Number two gave his eyeballs a lick. 'Yeah, but they sure are irritable.'

And that was when Holly's boot impacted with his chest, slamming him into the wall.

'Hey,' complained number one, bringing up his own gun. 'Not fair.'

Root didn't bother with fancy spinning kicks, preferring instead to body-slam the sentry against the titanium door.

'There,' panted Holly. 'Two down. That wasn't so hard.' A premature statement as it happened. Because that was when the rest of the two-hundred-strong B'wa Kell squadron thundered down the perpendicular corridor.

'That wasn't so hard,' mimicked the commander, curling his fingers into fists.

Artemis's concentration was failing him. There seemed to be more sparks now, and each shock disrupted his focus. He had lost count twice. He was at fifty-four now. Or fifty-six. The difference was life or death.

He trawled ahead, reaching out one arm and then the other, swimming through a turgid sea of gel. Vision was next to useless. Everything was orange. And the only confirmation he had that any progress was being made was when his knee sank into a recess, where the plasma diverted into a cannon.

Artemis punched one last time through the gel, filling his lungs with stale air -- sixty-three. That was it. Soon the air purifiers in his helmet would be useless and he would be breathing carbon dioxide.

He placed his fingertips against the pipe's inner curve, searching for a keyhole. Again his eyes were no help. He couldn't even activate the helmet lamps for fear of igniting a river of plasma.

Nothing. No indent. He was going to die here alone. He would never be great. Artemis felt his brain going, spiralling off into a black tunnel. Concentrate, he told himself. Focus. There was a spark approaching. A silver star in the sunset. It coiled lazily along the tube, lighting each section it passed.

There! A hole. The hole. Revealed for a moment by the passing spark. Artemis reached into his pocket like a drunken swimmer, pulling out the dwarf hair. Would it work? There was no

reason this access port should have a different locking mechanism.

Artemis slid the hair into the keyhole. Gently. He squinted through the gel. Was it going in? He thought so. Perhaps sixty per cent sure. It would have to be enough.

Artemis twisted. The flap dropped open. He imagined Mulch's grin. That, my boy, is talent.

It was quite possible that every enemy he had in the underworld was waiting outside that hatch, big nasty guns pointed at his head. At that point, Artemis didn't much care. He couldn't bear one more of his own oxygen-depleted breaths or one more excruciating shock to his body.

So, Artemis Fowl poked his helmet through the plasma's surface. He flipped the visor, savouring what could very well be his last breath. Lucky for him, the room's occupants were looking at the view screen.

Watching his friends fight for their lives. Not so lucky for his friends.

There are too many, thought Butler as he rounded the corner and saw almost an entire army of B'wa Kell slotting fresh batteries into their weapons.

The goblins, when they noticed Butler, began to think things like, O gods, it's a troll in clothes; or, why didn't I listen to Mummy and stay out of the gangs?

Then Butler was above them and on the way down. He landed like the proverbial tonne of bricks, except with considerably more precision. Three goblins were out cold before they knew they'd been hit. One shot himself in the foot and several others lay down pretending to be unconscious.

Artemis watched it all on the control room's plasma screen. Along with all the other occupants of the inner sanctum. It was entertainment to them. TV. The goblin generals chuckled and winced as Butler decimated their men. It was all immaterial. There were hundreds of goblins in the building and no way into this room.

Artemis had seconds to decide on a course of action. Seconds. And he had no idea how to use any of this technology. He scanned the walls below him for something he could use. Anything.

There. On a small picture-in-picture screen, away from the main console, was Foaly. Trapped in the Operations' booth. The centaur would have a plan. He had certainly had time to come up with one. Artemis knew that as soon as he emerged from the conduit he was a target. They would kill him without hesitation.

He dragged himself from within the tube, falling to Earth with a thick slap. His saturated clothes slowed his progress to the monitor bank. Heads were turning, he could see them out the corner of his eye. Figures came his way. He didn't know how many.

There was a reed mike below Foaly's image. Artemis pressed the button.

'Foaly!' he rasped, globs of gel splatting on to the console. 'Can you hear me?'

The centaur reacted instantly. 'Fowl? What happened to you?'

'Five seconds, Foaly. I need a plan or we're all dead.'

Foaly nodded curtly. 'I've got one ready. Put me on all screens.'

'What? How?'

'Press the conference button. Yellow. A circle with lines shooting out, like the sun. Do you see it?'

Artemis saw it. He pressed it. Then something pressed him. Very painfully.

General Scalene first noticed the creature flopping out of the plasma pipe. What was it? A pixie? No. No, by all the gods. It was human.

'Look!' he cackled. 'A Mud Man.'

The others were oblivious, too interested in the spectacle on-screen.

But not Cudgeon. A human in the inner sanctum. How could this be? He seized Scalene by the shoulders. 'Kill him!'

All the generals were listening now. There was killing to be done. With no danger to themselves. They would do this the old-fashioned way: with claws and fireballs.

The human stumbled to one of the consoles and they surrounded him, tongues dangling excitedly. Sputa spun the human around to face his fate.

One by one, the generals conjured fireballs around their fists, closing in for the kill. But then something made them completely forget the injured human. Cudgeon's face had appeared on all the screens. And the B'wa Kell executive didn't like what it was saying:

'-- Just when things are at their most desperate, I shall instruct Opal to return weapons control to the LEP. The B'wa Kell will be rendered unconscious, and you will be blamed for the entire affair, provided you survive, which I doubt -'

Sputa whirled on his ally. 'Cudgeon! What does this mean?'

The generals advanced, hissing and spitting. 'Treachery, Cudgeon! Treachery!'

Cudgeon was not unduly worried. 'OK,' he said. 'Treachery.'

It took Cudgeon a moment to figure out what had happened. It was Foaly. He must have recorded their conversation somehow. How tiresome. Still, you had to hand it to the centaur. He was resourceful.

Cudgeon quickly crossed to the main console, shutting off the broadcast. It wouldn't do for Opal to hear the rest of it. Particularly the part concerning her tragic accident. He really would have to cut out this grandstanding. Still, no matter. Everything was on track.

'Treachery!' hissed Scalene.

'OK,' admitted Cudgeon. 'Treachery.' And directly after that he said, 'Computer, activate DNA cannons. Authorization Cudgeon B. Alpha alpha two two.'

On her hover chair, Opal spun with sheer joy, clapping her tiny hands in delight. Briar was sooo ugly, but he was sooo evil.

Throughout Kobo Labs, robot DNA cannons perked up in their cradles and ran swift self-diagnostics. Apart from a slight drain in the inner sanctum, everything was in order. And so, without further ado, they began to obey their program parameters and target anything with goblin DNA at a rate often blasts per second.

It was swift and, as with everything Kobo, efficient. In less than five seconds, the cannons settled back into their cradles. Mission accomplished: two hundred unconscious goblins throughout the facility.

'Phew,' said Holly, stepping over rows of snoring goblins. 'Close one.'

'Tell me about it,' agreed Root.

Cudgeon kicked Sputa's sleeping body.

'You see, you haven't accomplished anything, Artemis Fowl,' he said, drawing his Redboy.

'Your friends are out there. You're in here. And the goblins are unconscious, soon to be mind-wiped with some particularly unstable chemicals. Just as I planned.' He smiled at Opal hovering above them. 'Just as we planned.'

Opal returned the smile.

At another time, Artemis would have been forced to pass a snide comment. But the possibility of imminent death was occupying his thoughts for the moment.

'Now, I simply reprogram the cannons to target your friends, return power to the LEP

cannons, and take over the world. And nobody can get in here to stop me.'

Of course, you should never say something like that, especially when you're an arch-villain. It's just asking for trouble.

Butler hurried down the corridor, catching up with the others outside the inner sanctum. He could see Artemis's predicament through the door's quartz pane. In spite of all his efforts, Master Artemis had still managed to place himself in mortal danger. How was a bodyguard supposed to do his job when his charge insisted on jumping into bear pits, so to speak?

Butler felt the testosterone building in his system. One door was all that separated him from Artemis. One little door, designed to withstand fairies with ray guns. He took several steps backwards.

Holly could tell what he was thinking. 'Don't bother. That door is reinforced.'

The manservant didn't answer. He couldn't. The real Butler was submerged beneath layers of adrenalin and brute force.

With a roar, Butler charged the entrance, concentrating all of his considerable might in the triangular point of his shoulder. It was a blow that would have felled a medium-sized hippopotamus. And while this door was tested for plasma dispersion and moderate physical resistance, it was certainly not Butler-proof. The metal portal crumpled like tin foil.

Butler's momentum took him halfway across the inner sanctum's rubber tiling. Holly and Root followed, pausing only to grab some Softnose lasers from the unconscious goblins.

Cudgeon moved fast, dragging Artemis upright. 'Don't move, any of you. Or I'll kill the Mud Boy.'

Butler kept right on going. His last rational thought had been to disable Cudgeon. Now this was his sole aim in life. He raced forward, arms outstretched.

Holly dived desperately, latching on to Butler's belt. He dragged her like a string of cans behind a wedding car.

'Butler, stop,' she grunted.

The bodyguard ignored her.

Holly hung on, digging in her heels. 'Stop!' she repeated, this time layering her voice with the mesmer.

Butler seemed to wake up. He shook the cave man from his system.

'That's right, Mud Man,' said Cudgeon. 'Listen to Captain Short. Surely we can work something out here.'

'No deals, Briar,' said Root. 'It's all over, so just put the Mud Boy down.'

Cudgeon cocked the Redboy. 'Til put him down all right.'

This was Butler's worst nightmare. His charge was in the hands of a psychopath with nothing to lose. And there was nothing he could do about it.

A phone rang.

'I think it's mine,' said Artemis automatically.

Another ring. Definitely his mobile phone. Amazing the thing worked at all really, considering what it had been through. Artemis ripped open the case.

'Yes?'

It was one of those frozen moments. Nobody knew what to expect.

Artemis tossed the handset at Opal Koboï. 'It's for

The pixie swooped low to catch the tiny mobile phone. Cudgeon's chest heaved. His body knew what was happening even if his brain hadn't figured it out yet.

Opal placed the tiny speaker to her pointed ear.

'-- Really, Foaly,' said Cudgeon's voice. 'Do you think I'd go to all this trouble to share power? Oh no. As soon as this charade is over, Miss Koboi will have a tragic accident. Perhaps several tragic accidents -- '

All colour drained from Opal's face. 'You!' she screeched.

'It's a trick!' protested Cudgeon. 'They're trying to turn us against each other.'

But his eyes told the real story.

Pixies are feisty creatures, in spite of their size. They put up with so much and then explode. For Opal Koboi, it was explosion time. She manipulated the Hoverboy's controls, dropping in a steep dive.

Cudgeon didn't hesitate. He put two bursts into the chair, but the thick cushion protected its pilot.

Opal Koboi flew straight at her former partner. When the elf raised his arms to protect himself, Artemis slid to the floor. Briar Cudgeon was not so lucky. He became entangled in the Hoverboy's safety rail and was borne aloft by the wildcat pixie. They whirled around the chamber ricocheting off several walls before crashing straight through the open plasma panel in the cannon Pipe - Unfortunately for Cudgeon, the plasma was now active. He had activated it himself. But this irony did not occur to him as he was fried by a million radioactive tendrils.

Koboi was lucky. She was pitched from the hoverchair and lay moaning on the rubber tiles.

Butler was on the move before Cudgeon landed. He flipped Artemis over, checking his frame for wounds. A couple of scratches. Superficial. Nothing a shot of blue sparks wouldn't take care of.

Holly checked Opal Koboi's status.

'She conscious?' asked the commander.

Koboi's eyes flickered open. Holly shut them with a swift rabbit punch to the forehead. 'Nope,' she said innocently. 'Out cold.'

Root took one look at Cudgeon and realized there was no point checking for vitals. Maybe he was better off. The alternative would have been a couple of centuries in Howler's Peak.

Artemis noticed movement by the door. It was Mulch. He was grinning and waving. Waving goodbye, just in case Julius forgot about his two-day head start. The dwarf pointed to a blue canister mounted on a wall bracket and he was gone.

'Butler,' rasped Artemis, with the absolute last ounce of his strength. 'Could someone spray me down? And then could we please go to Murmansk?'

Butler was mystified. 'Spray? What spray?'

Holly unhooked the anti-rad foam canister, flipping the safety catch. 'Allow me,' she said, grinning. 'It would be my pleasure.'

She directed a jet of foul-smelling foam at Artemis. In seconds, he resembled a half-melted snowman. Holly laughed. Who said there were no perks in law enforcement?

OPERATIONS' BOOTH

Once the cannon plasma had short-circuited Cudgeon's remote control, power came rushing back to the Operations' booth. Foaly lost no time in activating the subcutaneous sleepers planted below goblin offenders' skin. That put half of the B'wa Kell out of action straight away. Then he reprogrammed Police Plaza's own DNA cannons for non-lethal bursts. It was all over in

seconds. Captain Kelp's first thought was for his subordinates. 'Sound off,' he shouted, his voice slicing through the chaos. 'Did we lose anyone?'

The squadron leaders answered in sequence, confirming that there had been no fatalities.

'We were lucky,' remarked a warlock medic. 'There's not a drop of magic left in the building. Not even a medi-pac. The next officer to go down would have stayed down.'

Trouble turned his attention to the Ops' booth. He did not look amused.

Foaly depolarized the quartz window and opened a channel. 'Hey, guys. I wasn't behind this. It was Cudgeon. I just saved everyone. I sent a sound recording to a mobile phone; that wasn't easy. You should be giving me a medal.'

Trouble clenched his fist. 'Yeah, Foaly, come on out here and let me give you your medal.'

Foaly may not have had many social skills, but he knew thinly veiled threats when he heard them.

'Oh no. Not me. I'm staying right here until Commander Root gets back. He can explain everything.'

The centaur blacked out the window and busied himself running a bug sweep. He would isolate every last trace of Opal Koboi and flush it out of the system. Paranoid was he? Who was the paranoid one now, Holly? Who was the paranoid one now?

CHAPTER 14: FATHER'S DAY

MURMANSK

THE Arctic seascape between Murmansk and Severomorsk had become a submarine graveyard for Russia's once mighty fleet. Easily a hundred nuclear submarines lay rusting in the coastline's various inlets and fjords, with only the odd danger sign or roving patrol to warn off curious passers-by. At night, you didn't have to look too hard to see the glow, or listen too hard to hear the hum.

One such submarine was the Nikodim. A twenty-year-old Typhoon class, with rusty pipes and a leaky reactor. Not a healthy combination. And it was here that the Mafiya kingpin, Britva, had instructed his lackeys to make the exchange for Artemis Fowl Senior.

Mikhael Vassikin and Kamar were none too happy with the situation. They had been bunked in the captain's quarters for two days already, and were convinced their lives were growing shorter by the minute.

Vassikin coughed. 'You hear that? My guts aren't right. It's the radiation, I'm telling you.'

'This whole thing is ridiculous,' snarled Kamar. 'The Fowl boy is thirteen. Thirteen! He's a baby. How can a child raise five million dollars? It's crazy.'

Vassikin sat up on his bunk. 'Maybe not. I've heard stories about this one. They say he has powers.'

Kamar snorted. 'Powers? Magic? Oh, go stuff your head in the reactor, you old woman.'

'No, I have a contact in Interpol. They have an active file on this boy. Thirteen years old and with an active file? I am thirty-seven, and still no Interpol file.' The Russian sounded disappointed.

'An active file. What's magic about that?'

'But my contact swears that this boy, Fowl, is sighted all over the world, on the same day. The same hour.'

Kamar was unimpressed. 'Your contact is a bigger coward than you are.'

'Believe what you want. But I'll be happy to get off this cursed boat alive. One way or the other.'

Kamar pulled a fur cap down over his ears. 'OK. Let's go. It's time.'

'Finally,' sighed Vassikin.

The two men collected the prisoner from the next cabin. They were not worried about an escape attempt. Not with one leg missing and a hood secured over his head. Vassikin slung Fowl Senior over his shoulder and climbed the rungs to the conning tower.

Kamar used a radio to check in with the back-up. There were over a hundred criminals hiding among the petrified bushes and snowdrifts. Cigarette tips lit the night like fireflies.

'Put those cigarettes out, idiots,' he hissed over an open frequency. 'It's almost midnight. Fowl could be here any second. Remember, no one shoots until I give the order. Then everybody shoots.'

You could almost hear the hiss as a hundred cigarette butts were flicked into the snow. A hundred men. It was a costly operation. But a mere drop in the ocean compared to the twenty per cent promised them by Britva.

Wherever this boy Fowl came from, he would be trapped in a deadly crossfire. There was

no way out for him or his father, while he and Vassikin were safe behind the steel conning tower.

Kamar grinned. Let's see how much magic you have then, Irlanskii.

Holly surveyed the scene through the hi-res night-sight filter in her helmet with the eyes of a seasoned Recon officer. Butler was stuck with plain old binoculars.

'How many cigarettes did you count?'

'More than eighty,' replied the captain. 'Could be up to a hundred men. You walk in there and you'll be carried out.'

Root nodded in agreement. It was a tactical nightmare.

They were bivouacked on the opposite side of the fjord, high on a sloped hill. The Council had even approved wings, on account of Artemis's recent services.

Foaly had done a mail retrieval from Artemis's computer and found a message: Five million US. The Nikodim. Murmansk. Midnight on the fourteenth. It was short and to the point. What else was there to say? They had missed their opportunity to snatch Artemis Senior before he was moved to the drop point, and now the Mafiya were in control.

They gathered around while Butler sketched a diagram in the snow with a laser pointer.

'I would guess that the target is being held here, in the conning tower. To get there, you've got to walk all the way along the sub. They've got a hundred men hiding out around the perimeter. We have no air support, no satellite information and minimal weaponry.' Butler sighed. 'I'm sorry, Artemis. I just don't see it.'

Holly knelt to study the diagram. 'A time-stop would take days to set up. We can't shield either because of the radiation, and there's no way to get close enough to mesmerize.'

'What about LEP weaponry?' asked Artemis, though he knew the answer.

Root chewed an unlit cigar. 'We discussed this, Artemis. We have as much firepower as you like, but if we start blasting, your father will be their first target. Standard kidnapping rules.'

Artemis pulled an LEP field parka closer to his throat, staring at the rough diagram. 'And if we give them the money?'

Foaly had run them up five million in small bills on one of his old printers. He had even had a squad of sprites crumple it up a bit.

Butler shook his head. 'That's not the way these people do business. Alive, Mister Fowl is a potential enemy. He has to die.'

Artemis nodded slowly. There was absolutely no other way. He would have to implement the plan he had concocted in the Arctic shuttle port.

'Very well, everyone,' he said. 'I have a plan. But it's going to sound a bit extreme.'

Mikhael Vassikin's mobile phone rang, shattering the Arctic silence. Vassikin almost fell down the tower hatch.

'Da? What is it? I'm busy.'

'This is Fowl,' said a voice in flawless Russian, colder than Arctic pack ice. 'It's midnight. I'm here.'

Mikhael swung around, scanning the surroundings through his binoculars.

'Here? Where? I don't see anything.'

'Close enough.'

'How did you get this number?'

A chuckle rattled through the speakers. The sound set Vassikin's fillings on edge.

'I know someone. He has all the numbers.'

Mikhael took deep breaths, settling himself. 'Do you have the money?'

'Of course. Do you have the package?'

'Right here.'

Again the cold chuckle. 'All I see is a fat imbecile, a little rat and someone with a hood over his head. It could be anyone. I'm not paying five million for your cousin Yuri.'

Vassikin ducked below the lip of the tower. 'Fowl can see us!' he hissed at Kamar. 'Stay low.'

Kamar scuttled to the far side of the tower, opening a line to his men. 'He's here. Fowl is here. Search the area.'

Vassikin brought the phone back to his ear. 'So come down here and check. You'll see soon enough.'

'I can see fine from right here. Just take the hood off.'

Mikhael covered the phone. 'He wants me to take the hood off. What should I do?'

Kamar sighed. Now it was becoming plain who was the brains in this outfit. 'Take it off. What difference does it make? Either way they're both dead in five minutes.'

'OK, Fowl. I'm taking off the hood. The next face you see will be your father's.' The big Russian propped up the prisoner, high over the lip of the conning tower. He reached up with one hand and pulled off the rough sackcloth hood.

On the other end of the line, he heard a sharp intake of breath.

Through the filters of his borrowed LEP helmet, Artemis could see the conning tower as though it were a metre away. The hood came off, and he could not suppress a sharp gasp.

It was his father. Different certainly. But not beyond recognition. Artemis Fowl the First, without a shadow of a doubt.

'Well,' said a Russian voice in his ear. 'Is it him?'

Artemis struggled to stop his voice from shaking. 'Yes,' he said. 'It is him. Congratulations. You have an item of some value.'

In the conning tower, Vassikin gave his partner the thumbs up. 'It's him,' he hissed. 'We're in the money.'

Kamar didn't share his confidence. There would be no celebrating until the cash was in his hand.

Butler steadied the fairy Far shoot rifle on its stand. He had selected it from the LEP armoury. Fifteen hundred metres. Not an easy shot. But there was no wind, and Foaly had given him a scope that did the aiming for him. Artemis Fowl Senior's torso was centred in the crosshair.

He took a breath. 'Artemis. Are you sure? This is risky.'

Artemis did not reply, checking for the hundredth time that Holly was in position. Of course he wasn't sure. A million things could go wrong with this deception, but what choice did he have?

Artemis nodded. Just once.

Butler fired the shot.

The shot caught Artemis Senior in the shoulder. He spun around, slumping over the startled Vassikin.

The Russian howled in disgust, heaving the bleeding Irishman over the lip of the conning tower. Artemis Senior slid along the keel, crashing through the brittle ice plates clinging to the sub's hull.

'He shot him,' yelped the khuligany. 'That devil shot his own father.'

Kamar was stunned, 'idiot!' he howled. 'You've just thrown our hostage overboard!' He peered into the black Arctic waters. Nothing remained of the Irlanskii but ripples.

'Go down and get him, if you wish,' said Vassikin sullenly.

'Was he dead?'

His partner shrugged. 'Maybe. He was bleeding bad. And if the bullet doesn't finish him, the water will. Anyway, it's not our fault.'

Kamar swore viciously. 'I don't think Britva will see it that way.'

'Britva,' breathed Vassikin. The only thing the Menidzher understood was money. 'O gods. We're dead.'

The mobile phone rattled on the deck. The speaker was vibrating. Fowl was still on the other end.

Mikhael picked up the mobile as though it were a grenade. 'Fowl? You there?'

'Yes,' came the reply.

'You crazy devil! What are you doing? Your father is as good as dead. I thought we had a deal!'

'We still do. A new one. You can still make some money tonight.'

Mikhael stopped panicking and started paying attention. Could there possibly be a way out of this nightmare?

'I'm listening.'

'The last thing I need is for my father to return and destroy what I have built up over the past two years.'

Mikhael nodded. This made perfect sense to him.

'So he had to die. I had to see it done myself, just to be sure. But I could still leave you a little something.'

Mikhael could barely breathe. 'A little something?'

'The ransom. All five million.'

'And why would you do that?'

'You get the money; I get safe passage home. Fair enough?'

'Seems fair to me.'

'Very well. Now look across the bay, above the fjord.'

Mikhael looked. There was a flare burning, right at the snow-covered hill's tip.

'There is a briefcase tied to that flare. The flare goes out in ten minutes. I'd get there before then if I were you. Otherwise the case could take years to find.'

Mikhael didn't bother to cut the connection. He just dropped the phone and ran. 'The money,' he shouted at Kamar. 'Up there. The flare.'

Kamar was after him in a heartbeat, shouting instructions into the radio. Someone had to reach that money. Who cared about a drowning Irlanskii when there were five million dollars to be claimed?

Root pointed at Holly the moment Artemis Senior had been shot. 'Go!' he ordered.

Captain Short activated her wings, launching herself right off the hilltop. Of course, what they were doing here was against all the regulations, but the Council was cutting Foaly a lot of slack having more or less convicted him of treason. The only conditions were that the centaur was in constant communication, and that every member of the party was fitted with remote incineration packs, so that they and all their fairy technology could be destroyed in the event of capture or injury.

Holly followed events on the submarine through her visor. She saw the charge impact on Artemis Senior's shoulder, knocking him against the larger Russian. Blood registered in her field of vision. It was still warm enough to be picked up by her thermal imager. Holly had to admit, it

looked effective. Maybe Artemis's plan could actually work. Maybe the Russians would be fooled. After all, humans generally saw what they wanted to see.

Then things went horribly wrong.

'He's in the water!' shouted Holly into her helmet mike, opening the wing rig's throttle to the max. 'He's alive, but not for long unless we get him out.'

She skimmed silently over the glistening ice, arms crossed over her chest for speed. She was moving too fast for human vision to pin her down. She could be a bird, or a seal breaking the waves. The submarine loomed before her.

On board the Nikodim, the Russians were evacuating. Clambering down the tower ladder, feet slipping in their haste. And ashore, the same. Men breaking cover, crashing through the frosted undergrowth. The commander must have set the flare. Those Mud Men would be delirious to find their precious money, only to have it dissolve in seventy-two hours. That should just about give them time to deliver it to their boss. Odds on he wouldn't be happy with disappearing cash.

Holly skimmed the sub's keel, safe from radiation in her suit and helmet. At the last moment, she flipped upwards, shielded from the northern shore by the conning tower. She popped the throttle, hovering above the ice hole where the human had fallen in. The commander was talking into her ear, but Holly didn't reply. She had a job to do and no time for talk.

Fairies hate cold. They hate it. Some are so phobic about low temperatures that they won't even eat ice cream. The last thing Holly wanted to do right now was put so much as a toe into that sub-zero, radioactive water. But what choice did she have? 'D'Arvit,' she swore, and plunged into the water.

The micro-filaments in her suit deadened the cold, but they could not dispel it entirely. Holly knew that she had seconds before the temperature-drop slowed her reactions and sent her into shock.

Below her, the unconscious human was as pale as a ghost. Holly fumbled with her wing controls. A touch too much on the throttle could send her too deep. Not enough and she would fall short. And at these temperatures, you got one shot only.

Holly hit the throttle. The engine buzzed once, sending her ten fathoms down. Perfect. She grabbed Fowl Senior by the waist, quickly clipping him on to her Moonbelt. He hung there limply. He needed an infusion of magic, and the sooner the better.

Holly glanced upwards. It seemed as though the ice hole was already closing. Was there anything else that could go wrong? The commander was shouting in her ear, but she shut him out, concentrating on getting back to dry land.

Ice crystals spun themselves across the hole like spiders' webs. The ocean seemed determined to claim them.

I don't think so, thought Holly, pointing her helmeted head at the surface, and opening the throttle as far as it would go. They crashed through the ice, arced through the air and landed on the slatted surface of the sub's forward deck.

The human's face was the colour of the surrounding landscape. Holly crouched on his chest like a predatory creature, exposing the supposed wound to the night air. There was blood on the deck, but it was Artemis Junior's blood: they had pried the cap from a Hydrosion shell, and half filled it with blood taken from Artemis's arm. On impact, the Fizzer had knocked Artemis Senior off his feet, sending the crimson liquid spiralling through the air. Very convincing. Of course, being thrown into the freezing waters had not been part of the plan.

The shell had not penetrated his skin, but Mister Fowl was not safe yet. Holly's thermal

imager showed that his heartbeat was dangerously slow and weak. She laid her hands on his chest. 'Heal,' she whispered. 'Heal.'

And the magic scurried down her fingers.

Artemis couldn't watch Holly's rescue attempt. Had he done the right thing? What if the Hydrosion shell penetrated? How could he ever face his mother again?

'Oh no,' said Butler.

Artemis was at his side in an instant. 'What is it?'

'Your father is in the water. One of the Russians threw him in.'

The boy groaned. That water was as deadly as any bullet. He'd been afraid that something like this would happen.

Root had also been following the rescue attempt. 'OK. She's over the water. Can you see him, Holly?'

No answer. Just static in his earphones.

'Status, Captain? Respond.'

Nothing.

'Holly?'

She's not talking because it's too late, thought Artemis. There's nothing she can do to save my father and it's all my fault.

Root's voice cut through his thoughts. 'The Russians are evacuating,' he said. 'Holly's at the sub now, over the hole in the ice. She's going in. Holly, what have you got? Come on, Holly. Talk to me.'

Nothing. For the longest time.

Then Holly erupted through the ice like a mechanized dolphin. She arced briefly through the Arctic night, crash-landing on the Typhoon's deck.

'She has your father,' said the commander.

Artemis slipped on the spare Recon helmet, willing Holly's voice to sound through the speakers. He magnified the picture in his visor until it seemed as though he could touch his father and watched Holly lean over his father's chest, pulses of magic shooting down her fingers.

After several moments, Holly looked up, straight into Artemis's eyes, as though she knew he was watching. 'I got him,' she gasped. 'One live Mud Man. He's not pretty, but he's breathing.'

Artemis sank to the ground, sobs of relief shaking his thin shoulders. He cried for a whole minute. Then he was himself again.

'Well done, Captain. Now let's get out of here before Foaly activates one of these incinerator packs by accident.'

In the bowels of the Earth, the centaur leaned back from his communications console.

'Don't tempt me,' he chuckled.

AN EPILOGUE OR TWO

TARA

Artemis was heading back to St Bartleby's. This was where he had to be when the Helsinki medical services identified his father from the suitably weathered passport Foaly had run up for him.

Holly had done her best for the injured man, healing his chest wound and even restoring sight to his blinded eye. But it was too late to reattach the leg, which they didn't have in any case. No, Artemis Senior needed prolonged medical attention, and it had to begin somewhere that could be rationally explained. So Holly had flown south-west to Helsinki, depositing the unconscious man at the doors of the University Hospital. One porter had spotted the flying patient, but he had been successfully mind-wiped.

When Artemis Senior regained consciousness the past two years would be a blur, and his last memory would be a happy one: bidding his family farewell at Dublin harbour. Thanks again to Foaly and his mind-wiping technology.

'Why don't I just move in with you?' the centaur had quipped when they returned to Police Plaza. 'Do your ironing while I'm at it.'

Artemis smiled. He had been doing that a lot lately. Even the parting with Holly had gone better than he could have expected, considering she'd seen him shoot his own father. Artemis shuddered. He anticipated many sleepless nights over that particular strategy.

The captain escorted them to Tara, slipping them out through a holographic hedge. There was even a holographic cow chewing the virtual leaves to throw humans off the fairy scent.

Artemis was back in his school uniform, which had been miraculously restored by the People's technology. He sniffed his lapel.

'This blazer smells unusual,' he commented. 'Not unpleasant, but unusual.'

'It's completely clean,' said Holly, smiling. 'Foaly had to put it through three cycles in the machine to purge. . .'

'To purge the Mud People from it,' completed Artemis.

'Exactly.'

There was a full moon overhead, bright and pocked like a golf ball. Holly could feel its magic singing to her.

'Foaly said, in the light of the help you've given us, he's pulling the surveillance on Fowl Manor.' 'That's good to know,' said Artemis.

'Is it the right decision?'

Artemis considered it. 'Yes. The People are safe from me.'

'Good. Because a large section of the Council wanted you mind-wiped. And with a chunk of memory this big, your IQ could take a bit of a dip.'

Butler extended a hand. 'Well, Captain. I don't suppose I'll see you again.'

Holly shook it. 'If you do, it'll be too late.' Captain Short turned towards the fairy fort. 'I had better go. It will be light soon. I don't want to be caught unshielded on a spy satellite. The last thing I need is my photo all over the Internet. Not when I've just been reinstated at Recon.'

Butler elbowed his employer gently.

'Oh, Holly . . . Eh, Captain Short.' Eh? Artemis couldn't believe he'd actually said eh. It wasn't even a word.

'Yes, Mud B . . . Yes, Artemis?'

Artemis looked Holly in the eye, just as Butler had instructed. This 'being civil' business was more difficult than one would think. 'I would like to . . . I mean. What I mean is . . .'

Another elbow from Butler.

'Thank you. I owe you everything. Because of you I have my parents. And the way you flew that craft was nothing short of spectacular. And on the train . . . Well, I could never have done what you . . .'

A third elbow. This time to stop the babbling.

'Sorry. Well, you get the idea.'

Holly's elfin features wore a strange expression. Somewhere between embarrassment and -- could it possibly be? -- delight. She recovered quickly.

'Maybe I owe you something too, human,' she said, drawing her pistol. Butler almost reacted, but decided to give Holly the benefit of the doubt.

Captain Short plucked a gold coin from her belt, flicking it twenty metres into the moonlit sky. With one fluid movement, she brought her weapon up and loosed a single blast. The coin rose another twenty metres, then spun earthwards. Artemis somehow managed to snatch it from the air. The first cool moment of his young life.

'Nice shot,' he said. The previously solid disc now had a tiny hole in the centre.

Holly held out her hand, revealing the still-raw scar on her finger. 'If it wasn't for you, I would have missed altogether. No mech-digit can replicate that kind of accuracy. So, thank you too, I suppose.'

Artemis held out the coin.

'No,' said Holly. 'You keep it, to remind you.'

'To remind me?'

Holly stared at him frankly. 'To remind you that deep beneath the layers of deviousness, there is a spark of decency. Perhaps you could blow on that spark occasionally.'

Artemis closed his fingers around the coin. It was warm against his palm. 'Yes, perhaps.'

A small two-seater plane buzzed overhead. Artemis glanced skywards, and when he looked back Holly was gone. A slight heat haze hovered above the grass.

'Goodbye, Holly,' he said softly.

The Bentley started on the first turn of the key. In less than an hour they arrived at St Bartleby's main gate.

'Make sure your phone's switched on,' Butler said, holding the door. 'The Helsinki officials should be getting the results of their trace from Interpol soon. Your father's file has been reactivated in their mainframe thanks, once again, to Foaly.'

Artemis nodded, checking his phone was switched on. 'Try to locate Mother and Juliet before the news comes through. I don't want to be hunting through every spa in the south of France looking for them.'

'Yes, Artemis.'

'And check my accounts are well hidden. No need for Father to know exactly what I've been up to for the past two years.'

Butler smiled. 'Yes, Artemis.'

Artemis took a few steps towards the school gates, then turned. 'And, Butler, one more thing. In the Arctic . . .'

Artemis couldn't ask, but his bodyguard knew the answer anyway.

'Yes, Artemis,' he said gently. 'You did the right thing. It was the only way.'

Artemis nodded, standing by the gates until the Bentley had disappeared down the avenue. From this moment on, life would be different. With two parents in the manor, his schemes would have to be much more carefully planned. Yes, he owed it to the People to leave them alone for a while, but Mulch Diggums . . . that was a different matter. So many secure facilities, so little time.

COUNSELLOR'S OFFICE, ST BARTLEBY'S SCHOOL FOR YOUNG GENTLEMEN

Not only was Doctor Po still employed at St Bartleby's, but he seemed fortified by his break from Artemis. His other patients were relatively straightforward cases of anger management, exam stress and chronic shyness. And that was just the teachers.

Artemis settled on to the couch, taking care not to accidentally press the power button on his mobile.

Doctor Po nodded at his computer. 'Principal Guiney forwarded me your e-mail. Charming.'

'I'm sorry about that,' muttered Artemis, surprised to find that he actually was sorry. Upsetting other people didn't usually upset him. 'I was in denial. So, I projected my anxieties on to you.'

Po half chuckled. 'Yes, very good. Just what it says in the book.'

'I know,' said Artemis. And he did know. Doctor F. Roy Dean Schlippe had contributed a chapter to that particular book.

Doctor Po laid down his pen, something he had never done before.

'You know, we still haven't resolved that last issue.'

'Which issue is that, Doctor?'

'The one we touched on at our last session. About respect?'

'Ah, that issue.'

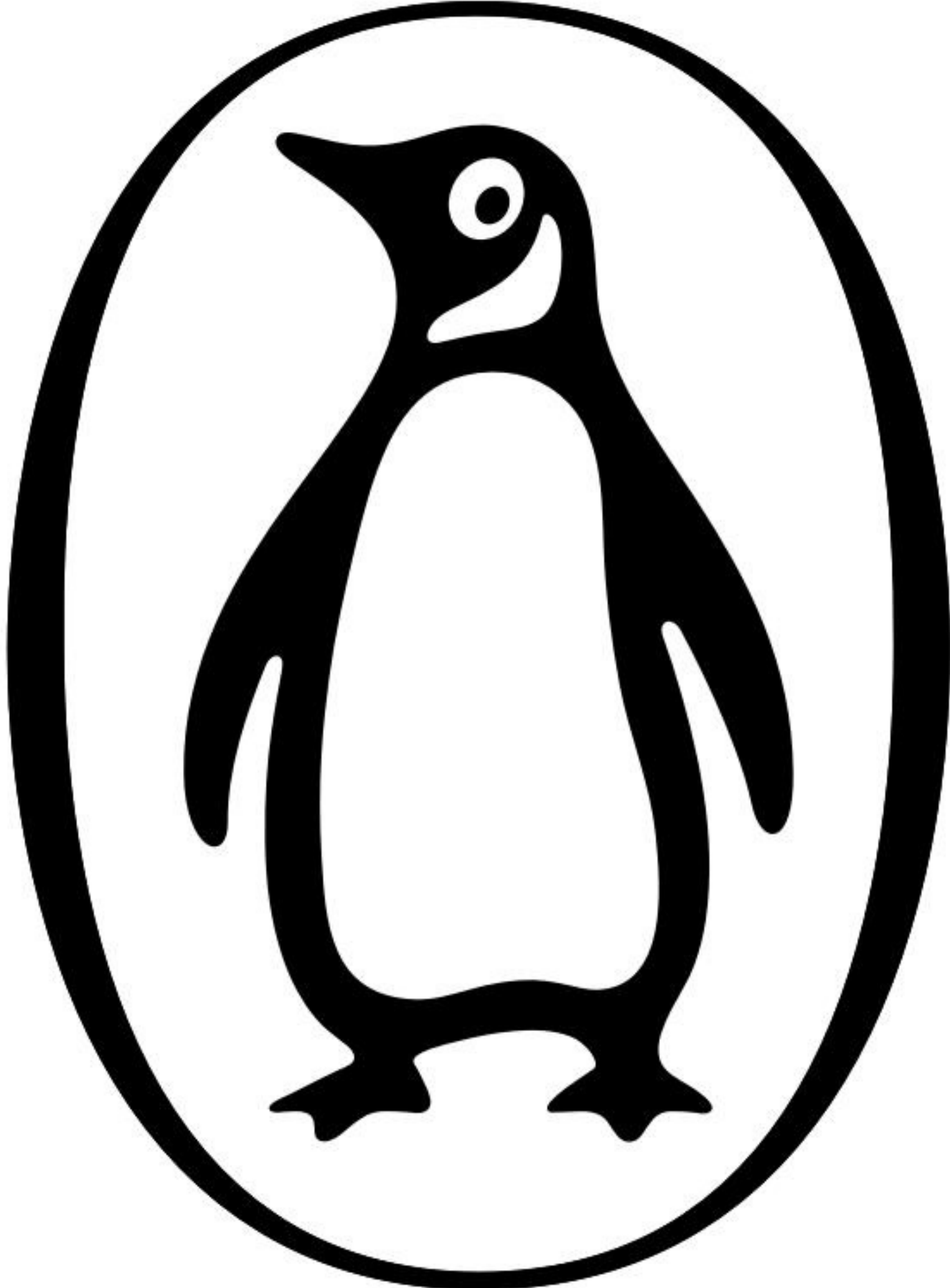
Po steepled his fingers. 'I want you to pretend I'm as smart as you are, and give me an honest answer.'

Artemis thought of his father lying in a Helsinki hospital, of Captain Holly Short risking her life to help him and, of course, Butler, without whom he would never have made it out of Koboi Laboratories. He looked up, catching Doctor Po smiling at him.

'Well, young man, have you found anyone worthy of your respect?'

Artemis smiled back. 'Yes,' he said. 'I believe I have.'

THE END



ARTEMIS FOWL



ARTEMIS FOWL is a child prodigy from Ireland who has dedicated his brilliant mind to criminal activities. When Artemis discovers that there is a fairy civilization below ground, he sees it as a golden opportunity. Now there is a whole new species to exploit with his ingenious schemes. But Artemis doesn't know as much as he thinks about the fairy People. And what he doesn't know could hurt him...

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ARTEMIS FOWL
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*To the Power family.
In-laws and outlaws.*

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PROLOGUE

EXCERPT FROM ARTEMIS FOWL'S DIARY. DISK 2. ENCRYPTED.

FOR the past two years my business enterprises have thrived without parental interference. In this time, I have sold the Pyramids to a Western businessman, forged and auctioned off the lost diaries of Leonardo da Vinci and separated the fairy People from a large portion of their precious gold. But my freedom to plot is almost at an end. As I write, my father lies in a hospital bed in Helsinki, where he recovers after a two-year imprisonment by the Russian Mafiya. He is still unconscious following his ordeal, but he will awaken soon and retake control of the Fowl finances.

With two parents resident in Fowl Manor, it will be impossible for me to conduct my various illegal ventures undetected. Previously this would not have been a problem as my father was a bigger crook than me, but Mother is determined that the Fowls are going straight.

However, there is time for one last job. Something that my mother would not approve of. I don't think the fairy folk would like it much either. So I shall not tell them.

PART 1: ATTACK

CHAPTER 1: THE CUBE

EN FIN, KNIGHTSBRIDGE, LONDON



ARTEMIS Fowl was almost content. His father would be discharged from Helsinki's University Hospital any day now. He himself was looking forward to a delicious late lunch at En Fin, a London seafood restaurant, and his business contact should arrive any moment. All according to plan.

His bodyguard, Butler, was not quite so relaxed. But then again he was never truly at ease – one did not become one of the world's deadliest men by dropping one's guard. The giant Eurasian flitted between tables in the Knightsbridge bistro, positioning the usual security items and clearing exit routes.

'Are you wearing the earplugs?' he asked his employer.

Artemis sighed deeply. 'Yes, Butler. Though I hardly think we are in danger here. It's a perfectly legal business meeting in broad daylight, for heaven's sake.'

The earplugs were actually sonic filter sponges, cannibalized from fairy Lower Elements Police helmets. Butler had obtained the helmets, along with a treasure trove of fairy technology, over a year previously when one of Artemis's schemes pitted him against a fairy SWAT team. The sponges were grown in LEP labs, and had tiny porous membranes that sealed automatically when decibel levels surpassed safety standards.

'Maybe so, Artemis, but the thing about assassins is that they like to catch you unawares.'

‘Perhaps,’ replied Artemis, perusing the menu’s entrée section. ‘But who could possibly have a motive to kill us?’

Butler shot one of the half-dozen diners a fierce glare, just in case she was planning something. The woman must have been at least eighty.

‘They might not be after *us*. Remember, Jon Spiro is a powerful man. He put a lot of companies out of business. We could be caught in a crossfire.’

Artemis nodded. As usual, Butler was right, which explained why they were both still alive. Jon Spiro, the American he was meeting, was just the kind of man to attract assassins’ bullets. A successful IT billionaire, with a shady past and alleged mob connections. Rumour had it that his company, Fission Chips, had made it to the top on the back of stolen research. Of course, nothing was ever proved – not that Chicago’s district attorney hadn’t tried. Several times.

A waitress wandered over, giving them a dazzling smile.

‘Hello there, young man. Would you like to see the children’s menu?’

A vein pulsed in Artemis’s temple.

‘No, mademoiselle, I would not like to see the *children’s menu*. I have no doubt the *children’s menu* itself tastes better than the meals on it. I would like to order à la carte. Or don’t you serve fish to minors?’

The waitress’s smile shrank by a couple of molars. Artemis’s vocabulary had that effect on most people.

Butler rolled his eyes. And Artemis wondered who would want to kill him. Most of the waiters and tailors in Europe, for a start.

‘Yes, sir,’ stammered the unfortunate waitress. ‘Whatever you like.’

‘What I would like is a medley of shark and swordfish, pan-seared, on a bed of vegetables and new potatoes.’

‘And to drink?’

‘Spring water. Irish, if you have it. And no ice, please, as your ice is no doubt made from tap water, which rather defeats the purpose of

spring water.'

The waitress scurried to the kitchen, relieved to escape from the pale youth at table six. She'd seen a vampire movie once. The undead creature had the very same hypnotic stare. Maybe the kid spoke like a grown-up because he was actually five hundred years old.

Artemis smiled in anticipation of his meal, unaware of the consternation he'd caused.

'You're going to be a big hit at the school dances,' Butler commented.

'Pardon?'

'That poor girl was almost in tears. It wouldn't hurt you to be nice occasionally.'

Artemis was surprised. Butler rarely offered opinions on personal matters.

'I don't see myself at school dances, Butler.'

'Dancing isn't the point. It's all about communication.'

'Communication?' scoffed young Master Fowl. 'I doubt there is a teenager alive with a vocabulary equal to mine.'

Butler was about to point out the difference between talking and communicating when the restaurant door opened. A small tanned man entered, flanked by a veritable giant. Jon Spiro and his security.

Butler bent low to whisper in his charge's ear. 'Be careful, Artemis. I know the big one by reputation.'

Spiro wound through the tables, arms outstretched. He was a middle-aged American, thin as a javelin, and barely taller than Artemis himself. In the eighties, shipping had been his thing; in the nineties he made a killing in stocks and shares. Now, it was communications. He wore his trademark white linen suit, and there was enough jewellery hanging from his wrists and fingers to gold leaf the Taj Mahal.

Artemis rose to greet his associate. 'Mister Spiro, welcome.'

'Hey, little Artemis Fowl. How the hell are you?'

Artemis shook the man's hand. His jewellery jangled like a

rattlesnake's tail.

'I am well. Glad you could come.'

Spiro took a chair. 'Artemis Fowl calls with a proposition: I would've walked across broken glass to be here.'

The bodyguards appraised each other openly. Apart from their bulk, the two were polar opposites. Butler was the epitome of understated efficiency. Black suit, shaven head, as inconspicuous as it was possible to be at almost seven feet tall. The newcomer had bleached blond hair, a cut-off T-shirt and silver pirate rings in both ears. This was not a man who wanted to be forgotten, or ignored.

'Arno Blunt,' said Butler. 'I've heard about you.'

Blunt took up his position at Jon Spiro's shoulder.

'Butler. One of *the* Butlers,' he said, in a New Zealand drawl. 'I hear you guys are the best. That's what I hear. Let's hope we don't have to find out.'

Spiro laughed. It sounded like a box of crickets.

'Arno, please. We are among friends here. This is not a day for threats.'

Butler was not so sure. His soldier's sense was buzzing like a nest of hornets at the base of his skull. There was danger here.

'So, my friend. To business,' said Spiro, fixing Artemis with his close-set dark eyes. 'I've been salivating all the way across the Atlantic. What have you got for me?'

Artemis frowned. He'd hoped business could wait until after lunch.

'Wouldn't you like to see a menu?'

'No. I don't eat much any more. Pills and liquids mostly. Gut problems.'

'Very well,' said Artemis, laying an aluminium briefcase on the table. 'To business then.'

He flipped the case's lid, revealing a red cube the size of a minidisc player, nestling in blue foam.

Spiro cleaned his spectacles with the tail end of his tie.

‘What am I seeing here, kid?’

Artemis placed the shining box on the table.

‘The future, Mister Spiro. Ahead of schedule.’

Jon Spiro leaned in, taking a good look.

‘Looks like a paperweight to me.’

Arno Blunt sniggered, his eyes taunting Butler.

‘A demonstration then,’ said Artemis, picking up the metal box. He pressed a button and the gadget purred into life. Sections slid back to reveal speakers and a screen.

‘Cute,’ muttered Spiro. ‘I flew three thousand miles for a micro-TV?’

Artemis nodded. ‘A micro-TV. But also a verbally controlled computer, a mobile phone, a diagnostic aid. This little box can read any information on absolutely any platform, electrical or organic. It can play videos, laserdiscs, DVDs; go online, retrieve e-mail, hack any computer. It can even scan your chest to see how fast your heart’s beating. Its battery is good for two years and, of course, it’s completely wireless.’

Artemis paused, to let it sink in.

Spiro’s eyes seemed huge behind his spectacles.

‘You mean, this box...?’

‘Will render all other technology obsolete. Your computer plants will be worthless.’

The American took several deep breaths.

‘But how... how?’

Artemis flipped the box over. An infrared sensor pulsed gently on the back.

‘This is the secret. An omni-sensor. It can read anything you ask it to. And if the source is programmed in, it can piggyback any satellite you choose.’

Spiro wagged a finger. ‘But that’s illegal, isn’t it?’

‘No, no,’ said Artemis, smiling. ‘There are no laws against something like this. And there won’t be for at least two years after it

comes out. Look how long it took to shut down Napster.'

The American rested his face in his hands. It was too much.

'I don't understand. This is years, no, *decades* ahead of anything we have now. You're nothing but a thirteen-year-old kid. How did you do it?'

Artemis thought for a second. What was he going to say? Sixteen months ago Butler took on a Lower Elements Police Retrieval squad and confiscated their fairy technology? Then he, Artemis, had taken the components and built this wonderful box? Hardly.

'Let's just say I'm a very smart boy, Mister Spiro.'

Spiro's eyes narrowed. 'Maybe not as smart as you'd like us to think. I want a demonstration.'

'Fair enough.' Artemis nodded. 'Do you have a mobile phone?'

'Naturally.' Spiro placed his mobile phone on the table. It was the latest Fission Chips model.

'Secure, I take it?'

Spiro nodded arrogantly. 'Five hundred bit encryption. Best in its class. You're not getting into the Fission 400 without a code.'

'We shall see.'

Artemis pointed the sensor at the handset. The screen instantly displayed an image of the mobile phone's workings.

'Download?' enquired a metallic voice from the speaker.

'Confirm.'

In less than a second, the job was done. 'Download complete,' said the box, with a hint of smugness.

Spiro was aghast. 'I don't believe it. That system cost twenty million dollars.'

'Worthless,' said Artemis, showing him the screen. 'Would you like to call home? Or maybe move some funds around? You really shouldn't keep your bank account numbers on a sim card.'

The American thought for several moments.

'It's a trick,' he pronounced finally. 'You must've known about my

phone. Somehow, don't ask me how, you got access to it earlier.'

'That is logical,' admitted Artemis. 'It's what I would suspect. Name your test.'

Spiro cast his eyes around the restaurant, fingers drumming the tabletop.

'Over there,' he said, pointing to a video shelf above the bar. 'Play one of those tapes.'

'That's it?'

'It'll do, for a start.'

Arno Blunt made a huge show of flicking through the tapes, eventually selecting one without a label. He slapped it down on the table, bouncing the engraved silver cutlery into the air.

Artemis resisted the urge to roll his eyes and placed the red box directly on to the tape's surface.

An image of the cassette's innards appeared on the tiny plasma screen.

'Download?' asked the box.

Artemis nodded. 'Download, compensate and play.'

Again, the operation was completed in under a second. An old episode of an English soap crackled into life.

'DVD quality,' commented Artemis. 'Regardless of the input, the C Cube will compensate.'

'The what?'

'C Cube,' repeated Artemis. 'The name I have given my little box. A tad obvious, I admit. But appropriate. The cube that sees everything.'

Spiro snatched the video cassette. 'Check it,' he ordered, tossing the tape to Arno Blunt.

The bleached-blond bodyguard activated the bar's TV, sliding the video into its slot. *Coronation Street* flickered across the screen. The same show. Nowhere near the same quality.

'Convinced?' asked Artemis.

The American tinkered with one of his many bracelets.

‘Almost. One last test. I have a feeling that the government is monitoring me. Could you check it out?’

Artemis thought for a moment, then addressed the red box again.

‘Cube, do you read any surveillance beams concentrated on this building?’

The machine whirred for a moment.

‘The strongest ion beam is eighty kilometres due west, emanating from US satellite code number ST1132P. Registered to the Central Intelligence Agency. Estimated time of arrival, eight minutes. There are also several LEP probes connected to...’

Artemis hit the mute button before the Cube could continue. Obviously the computer’s fairy components could pick up Lower Elements technology too. He would have to remedy that. In the wrong hands that information would be devastating to fairy security.

‘What’s the matter, kid? The box was still talking. Who are the LEP?’

Artemis shrugged. ‘No pay, no play, as you Americans say. One example is enough. The CIA no less.’

‘The CIA,’ breathed Spiro. ‘They suspect me of selling military secrets. They’ve pulled one of their birds out of orbit, just to track me.’

‘Or perhaps me,’ noted Artemis.

‘Perhaps you,’ agreed Spiro. ‘You’re looking more dangerous by the second.’

Arno Blunt chuckled derisively.

Butler ignored it. One of them had to be professional.

Spiro cracked his knuckles, a habit Artemis detested.

‘We’ve got eight minutes, so let’s get down to the nitty gritty, kid. How much for the box?’

Artemis was not paying attention, distracted by the LEP information that the Cube had almost revealed. In a careless moment, he had nearly exposed his subterranean friends to exactly the kind of man who would exploit them.

‘I’m sorry, what did you say?’

‘I said, how much for the box?’

‘Firstly, it’s a Cube,’ corrected Artemis. ‘And secondly, it’s not for sale.’

Jon Spiro took a deep, shuddering breath. ‘Not for sale? You brought me across the Atlantic to show me something you’re not going to sell me? What’s going on here?’

Butler wrapped his fingers around the handle of a pistol in his waistband. Arno Blunt’s hand disappeared behind his back. The tension cranked up another notch.

Artemis steeped his fingers. ‘Mister Spiro. Jon. I am not a complete idiot. I realize the value of my Cube. There is not enough money in the world to pay for this particular item. Whatever you could give me, it would be worth a thousand per cent more in a week.’

‘So what’s the deal, Fowl?’ asked Spiro, through gritted teeth. ‘What are you offering?’

‘I’m offering you twelve months. For the right price, I’m prepared to keep my Cube off the market for a year.’

Jon Spiro toyed with his ID bracelet. A birthday present to himself.

‘You’ll suppress the technology for a year?’

‘Correct. That should give you ample time to sell your stocks before they crash, and to use the profits to buy into Fowl Industries.’

‘There is no Fowl Industries.’

Artemis smirked. ‘There will be.’

Butler squeezed his employer’s shoulder. It was not a good idea to bait a man like Jon Spiro.

But Spiro hadn’t even noticed the jibe. He was too busy calculating, twisting his bracelet like a string of worry beads.

‘Your price?’ he asked eventually.

‘Gold. One metric ton,’ replied the heir to the Fowl estate.

‘That’s a lot of gold.’

Artemis shrugged. ‘I like gold. It holds its value. And anyway, it’s a

pittance compared to what this deal will save you.'

Spiro thought about it. At his shoulder, Arno Blunt continued staring at Butler. The Fowl bodyguard blinked freely: in the event of confrontation, dry eyeballs would only lessen his advantage. Staring matches were for amateurs.

'Let's say I don't like your terms,' said Jon Spiro. 'Let's say I decide to take your little gadget with me right now.'

Arno Blunt's chest puffed out another centimetre.

'Even if you could take the Cube,' said Artemis, smiling, 'it would be of little use to you. The technology is beyond anything your engineers have ever seen.'

Spiro gave a thin, mirthless smile. 'Oh, I'm sure they could figure it out. Even if it took a couple of years, it won't matter to you. Not where you're going.'

'If I go anywhere, then the C Cube's secrets go with me. Its every function is coded to my voice patterns. It's quite a clever code.'

Butler bent his knees slightly, ready to spring.

'I bet we could break that code. I got one helluva team assembled in Fission Chips.'

'Pardon me if I am unimpressed by your "*one helluva team*";' said Artemis. 'Thus far you have been trailing several years behind Phonetix.'

Spiro jumped to his feet. He did not like the P word. Phonetix was the only communications company whose stock was higher than Fission Chips's.

'OK, kid, you've had your fun. Now it's my turn. I have to go now, before the satellite beam gets here. But I'm leaving Mister Blunt behind.' He patted his bodyguard on the shoulder. 'You know what you have to do.'

Blunt nodded. He knew. He was looking forward to it.

For the first time since the meeting began, Artemis forgot about his lunch and concentrated completely on the situation at hand. This was not going according to plan.

‘Mister Spiro. You cannot be serious. We are in a public place, surrounded by civilians. Your man cannot hope to compete with Butler. If you persist with these ludicrous threats, I will be forced to withdraw my offer, and will release the C Cube immediately.’

Spiro placed his palms on the table. ‘Listen, kid,’ he whispered. ‘I like you. In a couple of years, you could have been just like me. But did you ever put a gun to somebody’s head and pull the trigger?’

Artemis didn’t reply.

‘No?’ grunted Spiro. ‘I didn’t think so. Sometimes that’s all it takes. Guts. And you don’t have them.’

Artemis was at a loss for words. Something that had only happened twice since his fifth birthday. Butler stepped in to fill the silence. Unveiled threats were more his area.

‘Mister Spiro. Don’t try to bluff us. Blunt may be big, but I can snap him like a twig. Then there’s nobody between me and you. And, take my word for it, you don’t want that.’

Spiro’s smile spread across his nicotine-stained teeth like a smear of treacle.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say there’s nobody between us.’

Butler got that sinking feeling. The one you get when there are a dozen laser sights playing across your chest. They had been set up. Somehow Spiro had outmanoeuvred Artemis.

‘Hey, Fowl?’ said the American. ‘I wonder how come your lunch is taking so long.’

It was at that moment Artemis realized just how much trouble they were in.

It all happened in a heartbeat. Spiro clicked his fingers and every single customer in En Fin drew a weapon from inside his or her coat. The eighty-year-old lady suddenly looked a lot more threatening with a revolver in her bony fist. Two armed waiters emerged from the kitchen wielding folding-stock machine guns. Butler never even had time to draw breath.

Spiro tipped over the salt cellar. 'Check and mate. My game, kid.'

Artemis tried to concentrate. There must be a way out. There was always a way out. But it wouldn't come. He had been hoodwinked. Perhaps fatally. No human had ever outsmarted Artemis Fowl. Then again, it only had to happen once.

'I'm going now,' continued Spiro, pocketing the C Cube, 'before that satellite beam shows up, and those other ones. The LEP, I've never heard of that particular agency. And as soon as I get this gizmo working they're going to wish they never heard of me. It's been fun doing business with you.'

On his way to the door, Spiro winked at his bodyguard.

'You got six minutes, Arno. A dream come true, eh? You get to be the guy who took out the great Butler.' He turned back to Artemis, unable to resist a final jibe.

'Oh, and by the way – Artemis, isn't that a girl's name?' And he was gone, into the multicultural throngs of tourists on the high street.

The old lady locked the door behind him. The click echoed around the restaurant.

Artemis decided to take the initiative. 'Now, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, trying to avoid staring down the black-eyed gun barrels. 'I'm sure we can come to an arrangement.'

'Quiet, Artemis!'

It took a moment for Artemis's brain to process the fact that Butler had *ordered* him to be silent. Most impertinently in fact.

'I beg your pardon...'

Butler clamped a hand over his employer's mouth.

'Quiet, Artemis. These people are professionals, not to be bargained with.'

Blunt rotated his skull, cracking the tendons in his neck.

'You got that right, Butler. We're here to kill you. As soon as Mister Spiro got the call we started sending people in. I can't believe you fell for it, man. You must be getting old.'

Butler couldn't believe it either. There was a time when he would

have staked out any rendezvous site for a week before giving it the thumbs-up. Maybe he *was* getting old, but there was an excellent chance he wouldn't be getting any older.

'OK, Blunt,' said Butler, stretching out his empty palms before him. 'You and me. One on one.'

'Very noble,' said Blunt. 'That's your Asian code of honour, I suppose. Me, I don't have a code. If you think I'm going to risk you somehow getting out of here, you're crazy. This is an uncomplicated deal. I shoot you. You die. No face-off, no duel.'

Blunt reached lazily into his waistband. Why hurry? One move from Butler and a dozen bullets would find their mark.

Artemis's brain seemed to have shut down. The usual stream of ideas had dried up. I'm going to die, he thought. I don't believe it.

Butler was saying something. Artemis decided he should listen.

'Richard of York gave battle in vain,' said the bodyguard, enunciating clearly.

Blunt was screwing a silencer on to the muzzle of his ceramic pistol.

'What are you saying? What kind of gibberish is that? Don't say the great Butler is cracking up! Wait till I tell the guys.'

But the old woman looked thoughtful.

'Richard of York... I know that.'

Artemis knew it too. It was virtually the entire verbal detonation code for the fairy sonix grenade magnetized to the underside of the table. One of Butler's little security devices. All they needed was one more word and the grenade would explode, sending a solid wall of sound charging through the building, blowing out every window and eardrum. There would be no smoke or flames, but anyone within a ten-metre radius not wearing earplugs had about five seconds before severe pain set in. One more word.

The old lady scratched her head with the revolver's barrel.

'Richard of York? I remember now, the nuns taught us that in school. Richard of York gave battle in vain. It's one of those memory

tricks. The colours of the rainbow.’

Rainbow. The final word. Artemis remembered – just in time – to slacken his jaw. If his teeth were clenched, the sonic waves would shatter them like sugar glass.

The grenade detonated in a blast of compressed sound, instantaneously hurling eleven people to the furthest extremities of the room, until they came into contact with various walls. The lucky ones hit partitions and went straight through. The unlucky ones collided with cavity block walls. Things broke. Not the blocks.

Artemis was safe in Butler’s bear-hug. The bodyguard had anchored himself against a solid door frame, folding the flying boy into his arms. And they had several other advantages over Spiro’s assassins: their teeth were intact, they did not suffer from any compound fractures and the sonic filter sponges had sealed, saving their eardrums from perforation.

Butler surveyed the room. The assassins were all down, clutching their ears. They wouldn’t be uncrossing their eyes for several days. The manservant drew his Sig Sauer pistol from a shoulder holster.

‘Stay here,’ he commanded. ‘I’m going to check the kitchen.’

Artemis settled back into his chair, drawing several shaky breaths. All around was a chaos of dust and moans. But once again, Butler had saved them. All was not lost. It was even possible that they could catch Spiro before he left the country. Butler had a contact in Heathrow Security: Sid Commons, an ex-Green Beret he’d served with on bodyguard duty in Monte Carlo.

A large figure came into view, blocking out the sunlight. It was Butler, returned from his reconnoitre. Artemis breathed deeply, feelingly uncharacteristically emotional.

‘Butler,’ he began. ‘We really must talk regarding your salary...’

But it wasn’t Butler. It was Arno Blunt. He had something in each hand. On his left palm, two tiny cones of yellow foam.

‘Ear plugs,’ he spat through broken teeth. ‘I always wear ’em before a fire fight. Good thing too, eh?’

In his right hand, Blunt held a silenced pistol.

'You first,' he said. 'Then the ape.'

Arno Blunt cocked the gun, took aim briefly and fired.

CHAPTER 2: LOCKDOWN

HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS



THOUGH Artemis did not intend it, the Cube's scan for surveillance beams was to have far-reaching repercussions. The search parameters were so vague that the Cube sent probes into deep space and, of course, deep underground.

Below the surface, the Lower Elements Police were stretched to their limits following the recent goblin revolution. Three months after the attempted goblin takeover, most of the major players were in custody. But there were still isolated pockets of the B'wa Kell triad loping around Haven's tunnels with illegal Softnose lasers.

Every available LEP officer had been drafted in to help with Operation Mop-Up before the tourist season got started. The last thing the city Council wanted was tourists spending their leisure gold in Atlantis because Haven's pedestrianized central plaza was not safe to wander through. Tourism, after all, accounted for eighteen per cent of the capital's revenue.

Captain Holly Short was on loan from the Reconnaissance squad. Generally, her job was to fly to the surface on the trail of fairies who had ventured above ground without a visa. If even one renegade fairy got himself captured by the Mud People, then Haven ceased to be a haven. So until every gang goblin was licking his eyeballs in Howler's Peak correctional facility, Holly's duties were the same as every other LEP officer: rapid response to any B'wa Kell alert.

Today she was escorting four rowdy goblin hoods to Police Plaza

for processing. They had been found asleep in an insect delicatessen, stomachs distended after a night of gluttony. It was lucky for them that Holly had arrived when she did, because the deli's dwarf owner was on the point of lowering the scaly foursome into the deep-fat fryer.

Holly's ride-along for Operation Mop-Up was Corporal Grub Kelp, little brother to the famous Captain Trouble Kelp, one of the LEP's most decorated officers. Grub, however, did not share his brother's stoic personality.

'I got a hangnail cuffing that last goblin,' said the junior officer, chewing on his thumb.

'Painful,' said Holly, trying to sound interested.

They were driving along a magnastrap to Police Plaza, with the perpetrators manacled in the rear of their LEP wagon. It wasn't actually a regulation wagon. The B'wa Kell had managed to burn out so many police vehicles during their short-lived revolution that the LEP had been forced to commandeer anything with an engine and room in the back for a few prisoners. In reality, Holly was piloting a curry van with the LEP acorn symbol spray-painted on the side. The motor-pool gnomes had simply bolted the serving hatch and removed the ovens. A pity they couldn't remove the smell.

Grub studied his wounded thumb. 'Those cuffs have sharp edges. I should lodge a complaint.'

Holly concentrated on the road, though the magnastrap did the steering for her. If Grub did lodge a complaint, it wouldn't be his first, or even his twentieth. Trouble's little brother found fault with everything, except himself. In this instance he was completely wrong: there were no sharp edges on the perspex vacuum cuffs. If there had been, a goblin might think to poke a hole in the other mitt and allow oxygen to reach his hand, and nobody wanted goblins hurling fireballs in the back of their vehicles.

'I know it sounds petty to lodge a complaint over hangnails, but no one could accuse *me* of being petty.'

'You! Petty! Perish the thought.'

Grub puffed up his chest. ‘After all, I am the only member of LEPretrieval One to have faced down the human, Butler.’

Holly groaned loudly. This, she fervently hoped, would dissuade Grub from telling his Artemis Fowl war story yet again. It grew longer and more fantastical each time. In reality, Butler had let him go, as a fisherman would a minnow.

But Grub was not about to take a hint.

‘I remember it well,’ he began melodramatically. ‘It was a dark night.’

And, as though his very words carried immeasurable magic, every light in the city went out.

Not only that, but the magnastrap’s power failed, leaving them stranded in the middle lane of a frozen highway.

‘I didn’t do that, did I?’ whispered Grub.

Holly didn’t answer, already halfway out of the wagon door. Overhead, the sun strips that replicated surface light were fading to black. In the last moments of half-light Holly squinted towards the Northern Tunnel and, sure enough, the door was sliding down, emergency lights revolving along its lower edge. Sixty metres of solid steel separating Haven from the outside world. Similar doors were dropping at strategic arches all over the city. Lockdown. There were only three reasons why the Council would initiate a city-wide lockdown: flood, quarantine, or discovery by the humans.

Holly looked around her. Nobody was drowning; nobody was sick. So the Mud People were coming. Finally, every fairy’s worst nightmare was coming true.

Emergency lights flickered on overhead, the sun strips’ soft white glow replaced by an eerie orange. Official vehicles would receive a burst of power from the magnastrap, enough to get them to the nearest depot.

Ordinary citizens were not so lucky; they would have to walk. Hundreds stumbled from their automobiles, too scared to protest. That would come later.

‘Captain Short! Holly!’

It was Grub. No doubt he would be lodging a complaint with someone.

‘Corporal,’ she said, turning back to the vehicle. ‘This is no time for panic. We need to set an example...’

The lecture petered out in her throat when she saw what was happening to the wagon. All LEP vehicles would have by now received the regulation ten-minute burst of power from the magnastrap to get them and their cargo to safety. This power would also keep the perspex cuffs vacuumed. Of course, as they weren’t using an official LEP vehicle they hadn’t been cleared for emergency power – something the goblins obviously realized, because they were trying to burn their way out of the wagon.

Grub stumbled from the cab, his helmet blackened by soot.

‘The cuffs have popped open, so now they’ve started blasting the doors,’ he panted, retreating to a safe distance.

Goblins. Evolution’s little joke. Pick the dumbest creatures on the planet and give them the ability to conjure fire. If the goblins didn’t stop blasting the wagon’s reinforced interior they would soon be encased in molten metal. Not a nice way to go, even if you were fireproof.

Holly activated the amplifier in her LEP helmet.

‘You there, in the wagon. Cease fire. The vehicle will collapse and you will be trapped.’

For several moments, smoke billowed from the vents. Then the vehicle settled on its axles. A face appeared at the grille, forked tongue slithering through the mesh.

‘You think we’re stupid, elf? We’re gonna burn clean through this pile of junk.’

Holly stepped closer, turning up the speakers.

‘Listen to me, goblin. You are stupid, let’s just accept that and move on. If you continue to fireball that vehicle, the roof will melt and fall on you like shells from a human gun. You may be fireproof, but are

you bulletproof?’

The goblin licked his lidless eyes, thinking it over.

‘You lie, elf! We will blow a hole right through this prison. You will be next.’

The wagon’s panels began to lurch and buckle as the goblins renewed their attack.

‘Not to worry,’ said Grub, from a safe distance. ‘The fire extinguishers will get them.’

‘They would,’ corrected Holly, ‘if the fire extinguishers weren’t connected to the main power grid, which is shut down.’

A mobile food-preparation wagon such as this one would have to adhere to the strictest fire regulations before setting one magna wheel on the strip. In this case, several foam-packed extinguishers, which could submerge the entire interior in flame-retardant foam in a matter of seconds. The nice thing about the flame foam was that it hardened on contact with air, but the not-so-nice thing about flame foam was that the trip switch was connected to the magna strip. No power. No foam.

Holly drew her Neutrino 2000 from its holster. ‘I’ll just have to trip this switch myself.’

Captain Short sealed her helmet and climbed into the wagon’s cab. She avoided touching metal wherever possible, because even though microfilaments in her LEP jumpsuit were designed to disperse extra heat, microfilaments didn’t always do what they were designed to do.

The goblins were on their backs, pumping fireball after fireball into the roof panels.

‘Knock it off!’ she ordered, pointing her laser’s muzzle through the mesh.

Three of the goblins ignored her. One, possibly the leader, turned his scaly face to the grille. Holly saw that he had eyeball tattoos. This act of supreme stupidity probably would have guaranteed him promotion had the B’wa Kell not been effectively disbanded.

‘You will not be able to get us all, elf,’ he said, smoke leaking from

his mouth and slitted nostrils. 'Then one of us will get you.'

The goblin was right, even if he didn't realize why. Holly suddenly remembered that she could not fire during a lockdown. Regulations stated that there were to be no unshielded power surges in case Haven was being probed.

Her hesitation was all the proof the goblin needed.

'I knew it!' he crowed, tossing a casual fireball at the grille. The mesh glowed red, and sparks cascaded against Holly's visor. Over the goblins' heads, the roof sagged dangerously. A few more seconds and it would collapse.

Holly unclipped a piton dart from her belt, screwing it into the launcher above the Neutrino's main barrel. The launcher was spring-loaded, like an old-fashioned spear gun, and would not give off a heat flash: nothing to alarm any sensors.

The goblin was highly amused, as goblins often are just before incarceration, which explains why so many are incarcerated.

'A dart? You going to prod us all to death, little elf?'

Holly aimed at a clip protruding from the fire-foam nozzle in the rear of the wagon.

'Would you please be quiet?' she said, and launched the dart. It flew over the goblin's head, jamming itself between the rods of the nozzle clip; the piton cord stretched the length of the wagon.

'Missed me,' said the goblin, wagging his forked tongue. It was a testament to the goblin's stupidity that he could be trapped in a melting vehicle during a lockdown with an LEP officer firing at him, and still think he had the upper hand.

'I told you to be quiet!' said Holly, pulling sharply on the piton cord and snapping the clip.

Eight hundred kilograms of extinguisher foam blasted from the diffuser nozzle at over two hundred miles per hour. Needless to say, all fireballs went out. The goblins were pinned down by the force of the already hardening foam. The leader was pressed so forcibly against the grille that his tattooed eyes were easily legible. One said

‘Mummy’, the other ‘Duddy’. A misspelling, though he probably didn’t know it.

‘Ow,’ he said. More from disbelief than pain. He didn’t say anything else, because his mouth was full of congealing foam.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Holly. ‘The foam is porous, so you will be able to breathe, but it’s also completely fireproof, so good luck trying to burn your way out.’

Grub was still examining his hangnail when Holly emerged from the van. She removed her helmet, wiping the soot from the visor with the sleeve of her jumpsuit. It was supposed to be non-stick; maybe she should send it in for another coating.

‘Everything all right?’ asked Grub.

‘Yes, Corporal. Everything is all right. No thanks to you.’

Grub had the audacity to look offended. ‘I was securing the perimeter, Captain. We can’t all be action heroes.’

That was typical Grub, an excuse for every occasion. She could deal with him later. Now it was vital that she get to Police Plaza and find out why the Council had shut down the city.

‘I think we should get back to HQ,’ Grub offered. ‘The intelligence boys might want to interview me if the humans are invading.’

‘I think *I* should get back to HQ,’ said Holly. ‘You stay here and keep an eye on the suspects until the power comes back on. Do you think you can handle that? Or are you too incapacitated with that hangnail?’

Holly’s auburn hair stood in sweat-slicked spikes, and her round hazel eyes dared Grub to argue.

‘No, Holly... Captain. You leave it to me. Everything is under control.’

I doubt it, thought Holly, setting off at a run towards Police Plaza.

The city was in complete chaos. Every citizen was on the street staring at his or her dead appliance in disbelief. For some of the younger fairies, the loss of their mobile phones was too much to bear.

They sank to the streets, sobbing gently.

Police Plaza was mobbed by enquiring minds, like moths drawn to a light. In this case, one of the only lights in town. Hospitals and emergency vehicles would still have juice but, otherwise, the LEP headquarters was the only government building still functioning.

Holly forced her way through the crowd, into the lobby area. The public service queues ran down the steps and out the door. Today everyone was asking the same question: What's happened to the power?

The same question was on Holly's lips as she burst into the Situations booth, but she kept it to herself. The room was already packed with the force's complement of captains, along with the three regional commanders and all seven Council members.

'Aaah,' said Chairman Cahartez. 'The last captain.'

'I didn't get my emergency juice,' explained Holly. 'Non-regulation vehicle.'

Cahartez adjusted his official conical hat. 'No time for excuses, Captain, Mister Foaly has been holding off on his briefing until you got here.'

Holly took her seat at the captain's table, beside Trouble Kelp.

'Grub OK?' he whispered.

'He got a hangnail.'

Trouble rolled his eyes. 'No doubt he'll make a complaint.'

The centaur Foaly trotted through the doors, clutching armfuls of disks. Foaly was the LEP's technical genius, and his security innovations were the main reason why humans had not yet discovered the subterranean fairy hideaway. Maybe that was about to change.

The centaur expertly loaded the disks on to the operating system, opening several windows on a wall-size plasma screen. Various complicated-looking algorithms and wave patterns appeared on the screen.

He cleared his throat noisily. 'I advised Chairman Cahartez to

initiate lockdown on the basis of these readings.'

Recon's Commander Root sucked on an unlit fungus cigar. 'I think I'm speaking for the whole room here, Foaly, when I say that all I see is lines and squiggles. Doubtless it makes sense to a smart pony like yourself, but the rest of us are going to need some plain Gnommish.'

Foaly sighed. 'Simply put. Really simply. We got pinged. Is that plain enough?'

It was. The room resonated with stunned silence. Pinged was an old naval term from back in the days when sonar was the preferred method of detection. Getting pinged was slang for being detected. Someone knew the fairy folk were down here.

Root was the first to recover his voice. 'Pinged. Who pinged us?'

Foaly shrugged. 'Don't know. It only lasted a few seconds. There was no recognizable signature, and it was untraceable.'

'What did they get?'

'Quite a bit. Everything North European. Scopes, Sentinel. All our cam-cams. Downloaded information on every one of them.'

This was catastrophic news. Someone or something knew all about fairy surveillance in Northern Europe, after only a few seconds.

'Was it human,' asked Holly, 'or alien?'

Foaly pointed to a digital representation of the beam. 'I can't say for certain. If it is human, it's something brand new. This came out of nowhere. No one has been developing technology like this as far as I know. Whatever it is, it read us like an open book. My security encryptions folded like they weren't even there.'

Cahartez took off his official hat, no longer concerned with protocol. 'What does this mean for the People?'

'It's difficult to say. There are best and worst case scenarios. Our mysterious guest could learn all about us whenever he wishes and do with our civilization what he will.'

'And the best case scenario?' asked Trouble.

Foaly took a breath. 'That was the best case scenario.'

Commander Root called Holly into his office. The room stank of cigar smoke in spite of the purifier built into the desk. Foaly was already there, his fingers a blur over the commander's keyboard.

'The signal originated in London somewhere,' said the centaur. 'We only know that because I happened to be looking at the monitor at the time.' He leaned back from the keyboard, shaking his head. 'This is incredible. It's some kind of hybrid technology. Almost like our ion systems, but not quite – just a hair's breadth away.'

'The how is not important now,' said Root. 'It's the who I'm worried about.'

'What can I do, sir?' asked Holly.

Root stood and walked to a map of London on the wall plasma screen.

'I need you to sign out a surveillance pack, go topside and wait. If we get pinged again, I want someone on site, ready to go. We can't record this thing, but we can certainly get a visual on the signal. As soon as it shows up on the screen we'll feed you the coordinates and you can investigate.'

Holly nodded. 'When is the next hotshot?'

Hotshot was LEP-speak for the magma flares that Recon officers ride to the surface in titanium eggs. Pod pilots referred to this seat-of-the-pants procedure as 'Riding the Hotshots'.

'No such luck,' replied Foaly. 'Nothing in the pipes for the next two days. You'll have to take a shuttle.'

'What about the lockdown?'

'I've restored power to Stonehenge and our satellite arrays. We'll have to risk it; you need to get above ground and we need to stay in contact. The future of our civilization could depend on it.'

Holly felt the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders. This *future of our civilization* thing was happening more and more lately.

CHAPTER 3: ON ICE

En FIN, KNIGHTSBRIDGE



THE sonic blast from Butler's grenade had crashed through the kitchen door, sweeping aside stainless-steel implements like stalks of grass. The aquarium had shattered, leaving the flagstones slick with water, perspex and surprised lobsters. They skittered through the debris, claws raised.

The restaurant staff were on the floor, bound and saturated, but alive. Butler did not untie them. He did not need hysteria right now. Time enough to deal with them once all threats had been neutralized.

An assassin stirred, suspended halfway through a dividing wall. The manservant checked her eyes. They were crossed and unfocused. No threat there. Butler pocketed the old lady's weapon just the same. You couldn't be too careful – something he was learning all over again. If Madame Ko could have seen this afternoon's display, she would have had his graduation tattoo lasered for sure.

The room was clear, but still something was bothering the bodyguard. His soldier's sense grated like two broken bones. Once again Butler flashed back to Madame Ko, his sensei from the Academy. *The bodyguard's primary function is to protect his principal. The principal cannot be shot if you are standing in front of him.* Madame Ko always referred to employers as principals. One did not become involved with principals.

Butler wondered why this particular maxim had occurred to him. Out of the hundreds Madame Ko had drummed into his skull, why

this one? It was obvious really. He had broken the first rule of personal protection by leaving his principal unguarded. The second rule: *Do not develop an emotional attachment to the principal* was pretty much in smithereens too. Butler had become so attached to Artemis that it was obviously beginning to affect his judgement.

He could see Madame Ko before him, nondescript in her khaki suit, for all the world an ordinary Japanese housewife. But how many housewives of any nationality could strike so quickly that the air hissed? *You are a disgrace, Butler. A disgrace to your name. It would better suit your talents to get a job mending shoes. Your principal has already been neutralized.*

Butler moved as though in a dream. The very air seemed to hold him back as he raced for the kitchen doors. He knew what would have happened. Arno Blunt was a professional. Vain perhaps – a cardinal sin among bodyguards – but a professional nevertheless. Professionals always inserted earplugs if there was any danger of gunfire.

The tiles were slick beneath his feet, but Butler compensated by leaning forward and digging his rubber-soled toes into the surface. His intact eardrums picked up irregular vibrations from the restaurant. Conversation. Artemis was speaking with someone. Arno Blunt, no doubt. It was already too late.

Butler came through the service door at a speed that would have shamed an Olympian. His brain began calculating odds the moment pictures arrived from his retinas: Blunt was in the act of firing. Nothing could be done about that now. There was only one option. Without hesitation, Butler took it.

In his right hand, Blunt held a silenced pistol.

‘You first,’ he said. ‘Then the ape.’

Arno Blunt cocked the gun, took aim briefly and fired.

Butler came from nowhere. He seemed to fill the entire room, flinging himself in the bullet’s path. From a greater distance, the Kevlar in his bulletproof vest might have held, but at point-blank

range, the Teflon-coated bullet drilled through the waistcoat like a hot poker through snow. It entered Butler's chest a centimetre below the heart. It was a fatal wound. And this time Captain Short was not around to save him with her fairy magic.

The bodyguard's own momentum, combined with the force of the bullet, sent Butler crashing into Artemis, pinning him to the dessert trolley. Nothing of the boy was visible, save one Armani loafer.

Butler's breathing was shallow and his vision gone, but he was not dead yet. His brain's electricity was rapidly running out, but the bodyguard held on to a single thought: protect the principal.

Arno Blunt drew a surprised breath, and Butler fired six shots at the sound. He would have been disappointed with the spread had he been able to see it. But one of the bullets found its mark, clipping Blunt's temple. Unconsciousness was immediate, concussion inevitable. Arno Blunt joined the rest of his team, on the floor.

Butler ignored the pain squashing his torso like a giant fist. Instead he listened for movement. There was nothing locally, just the scratch of lobster claws on the tiles. And if one of the lobsters decided to attack, Artemis was on his own.

Nothing more could be done. Either Artemis was safe, or he was not. If not, Butler was in no condition to fulfil the terms of his contract. This realization brought tremendous calm. No more responsibility. Just his own life to live, for a few seconds at any rate. And anyway, Artemis wasn't just a principal. He was part of the bodyguard's life. His only true friend. Madame Ko might not like this attitude, but there wasn't much she could do about it now. There wasn't much anybody could do.

Artemis had never liked desserts. And yet, he found himself submersed in eclairs, cheesecake and pavlova. His suit would be absolutely destroyed. Of course, Artemis's brain was only throwing up these facts so he could avoid thinking about what had happened. But a ninety-kilogram deadweight is a hard thing to ignore.

Luckily for Artemis, Butler's impact had actually driven him

through to the trolley's second shelf, while the bodyguard remained on the ice-cream ledge above. As far as Artemis could tell, the Black Forest gâteau had cushioned his impact sufficiently to avoid serious internal injury. Still, he had no doubt that a visit to the chiropractor would be called for. Possibly for Butler too, though the man had the constitution of a troll.

Artemis struggled out from underneath his manservant. With each movement, malignant cream horns exploded in his direction.

'Really, Butler,' grumbled the teenager. 'I must begin choosing my business associates more carefully. Hardly a day goes by when we aren't the victims of some plot.'

Artemis was relieved to see Arno Blunt unconscious on the restaurant floor.

'Another villain dispatched. Good shooting, Butler, as usual. And one more thing, I have decided to wear a bulletproof vest to all future meetings. That should make your job somewhat easier, eh?'

It was at this point that Artemis noticed Butler's shirt. The sight knocked the air from his chest like an invisible mallet. Not the hole in the material, but the blood leaking from it.

'Butler, you're injured. Shot. But the Kevlar?'

The bodyguard didn't reply, nor did he have to. Artemis knew science better than most nuclear physicists. Truth be told, he often posted lectures on the Internet under the pseudonym Emmsey Squire. Obviously the bullet's momentum had been too great for the jacket to withstand. It had possibly been coated with Teflon for extra penetration.

A large part of Artemis wanted to drape his arms across the bodyguard's frame and cry as he would for a brother. But Artemis repressed that instinct. Now was the time for quick thinking.

Butler interrupted his train of thought.

'Artemis... is that you?' he said, the words coming in short gasps.

'Yes, it's me,' answered Artemis, his voice trembling.

'Don't worry. Juliet will protect you. You'll be fine.'

‘Don’t talk, Butler. Lie still. The wound is not serious.’

Butler spluttered. It was as close as he could get to a laugh.

‘Very well, it is serious. But I will think of something. Just stay still.’

With his last vestige of strength, Butler raised a hand.

‘Goodbye, Artemis,’ he said. ‘My friend.’

Artemis caught the hand. The tears were streaming now. Unchecked.

‘Goodbye, Butler.’

The Eurasian’s sightless eyes were calm. ‘Artemis, call me – Domovoi.’

The name told Artemis two things. Firstly, his lifelong ally had been named after a Slavic guardian spirit. Secondly, graduates of the Madame Ko Academy were instructed never to reveal first names to their principals. It helped to keep things clinical. Butler would never have broken this rule... unless it no longer mattered.

‘Goodbye, Domovoi,’ sobbed the boy. ‘Goodbye, my friend.’

The hand dropped. Butler was gone.

‘No!’ shouted Artemis, staggering backwards.

This wasn’t right. This was not the way things should end. For some reason, he had always imagined that they would die together – facing insurmountable odds, in some exotic location. On the lip of a reactivated Vesuvius perhaps, or on the banks of the mighty Ganges. But together, as friends. After all they had been through, Butler simply could not be defeated at the hands of some grandstanding second-rate muscleman.

Butler had almost died before. The year before last, he had been mauled by a troll from the deep tunnels below Haven City. Holly Short had saved him then, using her fairy magic. But now there were no fairies around to save the bodyguard. Time was the enemy here. If Artemis had more of it, he could figure out how to contact the LEP and persuade Holly to use her magic once again. But time was running out. Butler had perhaps four minutes before his brain shut

down. Not long enough, even for an intellect such as Artemis's – he needed to buy some more time. Or steal some.

Think, boy, think. Use what the situation provides. Artemis shut off the wellspring of tears. He was in a restaurant, a fish restaurant. Useless! Worthless! Perhaps in a medical facility he could do something. But here? What was here? An oven, sinks, utensils. Even if he did have the proper tools, he had not yet completed his medical studies. It was too late for conventional surgery at any rate – unless there was a method of heart transplant that took less than four minutes.

The seconds were ticking by. Artemis was growing angry with himself. Time was against them. Time was the enemy. Time needed to be stopped. The idea sparked in Artemis's brain in a flash of neurons. Perhaps he couldn't stop time, but he could halt Butler's passage through it. The process was risky, certainly, but it was the only chance they had.

Artemis popped the dessert trolley's brake with his foot, and began hauling the contraption towards the kitchen. He had to pause several times to drag moaning assassins from the vehicle's path.

Emergency vehicles were approaching, making their way down Knightsbridge. Obviously the sonic grenade's detonation would have attracted attention. There were only moments left before he would have to fabricate some plausible story for the authorities... Better not to be there... Fingerprints wouldn't be a problem, as the restaurant would have had dozens of customers. All he had to do was get out of there before London's finest arrived.

The kitchen was forged from stainless steel. Hobs, hoods and work surfaces were littered with fallout from the sonic grenade. Fish flapped in the sink, crustaceans clicked across the tiles and beluga dripped from the ceiling.

There! At the back, a line of freezers, essential in any seafood bistro. Artemis put his shoulder against the trolley, steering it to the rear of the kitchen.

The largest of the freezers was of the custom-built pull-out variety,

often found in large restaurants. Artemis hauled open the drawer, quickly evicting the salmon, sea bass and hake that were encrusted in the ice shavings.

Cryogenics. It was their only chance. The science of freezing a body until medicine had evolved sufficiently to revive it. Generally dismissed by the medical community, it nevertheless made millions each year from the estates of rich eccentrics who needed more than one lifetime to spend their money. Cryogenic chambers were generally built to very exact specifications, but there was no time for Artemis's usual standards now. This freezer would have to do as a temporary solution. It was imperative that Butler's head be cooled to preserve the brain cells. So long as his brain functions were intact, he could theoretically be revived, even if there were no heartbeat.

Artemis manoeuvred the trolley until it overhung the open freezer; then, with the help of a silver platter, he levered Butler's body into the steaming ice. It was tight, but the bodyguard fitted with barely a bend of the legs. Artemis heaped loose ice on top of his fallen comrade, and then adjusted the thermostat to four below zero to avoid tissue damage. Butler's blank face was just visible through a layer of ice.

'I'll be back,' the boy said. 'Sleep well.'

The sirens were close now. Artemis heard the screech of tyres.

'Hold on, Domovoi,' whispered Artemis, closing the freezer drawer.

Artemis left through the back door, mingling with the crowds of locals and sightseers. The police would have someone photographing the crowd, so he did not linger at the cordon, or even glance back towards the restaurant. Instead, he made his way to Harrods and found himself a table at the gallery cafe.

Once he had assured the waitress that he was not looking for his mummy, and produced sufficient cash to pay for his pot of Earl Grey tea, Artemis pulled out his mobile, selecting a number from the speed-dial menu.

A man answered on the second ring.

‘Hello. Make it quick, whoever you are. I’m very busy at the moment.’

The man was Detective Inspector Justin Barre of New Scotland Yard. Barre’s gravelly tones were caused by a hunting knife across the gullet during a bar fight in the nineties. If Butler hadn’t been on hand to stop the bleeding, Justin Barre would never have risen beyond Sergeant. It was time to call in the debt.

‘Detective Inspector Barre. This is Artemis Fowl.’

‘Artemis, how are you? And how’s my old partner, Butler?’

Artemis kneaded his forehead. ‘Not well at all, I’m afraid. He needs a favour.’

‘Anything for the big man. What can I do?’

‘Did you hear something about a disturbance in Knightsbridge?’

There was a pause. Artemis heard paper rip as a fax was torn off the roll.

‘Yes, it just came in. A couple of windows were shattered in some restaurant. Nothing major. Some tourists are a bit shell-shocked. Preliminary reports say it was some kind of localized earthquake, if you can believe that. We’ve got two cars there right now. Don’t tell me Butler was behind it?’

Artemis took a breath. ‘I need you to keep your men away from the freezers.’

‘That’s a strange request, Artemis. What’s in the freezers that I shouldn’t see?’

‘Nothing illegal,’ promised Artemis. ‘Believe me when I say this is life or death for Butler.’

Barre didn’t hesitate. ‘This is not exactly in my jurisdiction, but consider it done. Do you need to get whatever I’m not supposed to see out of the freezers?’

The officer had read his mind. ‘As soon as possible. Two minutes are all I need.’

Barre chewed it over. ‘OK. Let’s synchronize schedules. The forensics team is going to be in there for a couple of hours. Nothing I

can do about that. But at six-thirty precisely, I can guarantee there won't be anyone on duty. You have five minutes.'

'That will be more than sufficient.'

'Good. And tell the big man that we're quits.'

Artemis kept his voice even. 'Yes, Detective Inspector. I'll tell him.'
If I get the opportunity, he thought.

ICE AGE CRYOGENICS INSTITUTE, OFF HARLEY STREET, LONDON

The Ice Age Cryogenics Institute was not actually on London's Harley Street. Technically, it was tucked away in Dickens Lane, a side alley on the famous medical boulevard's southern end. But this did not stop the facility's MD, one Doctor Constance Lane, from putting Harley Street on all Ice Age stationery. You couldn't buy credibility like that. When the upper classes saw those magic words on a business card they fell over themselves to have their frail frames frozen.

Artemis Fowl was not so easily impressed. But then he had little choice; Ice Age was one of three cryogenic centres in the city, and the only one with free units. Though Artemis did consider the neon sign a bit much: 'Pods to Rent'. Honestly.

The building itself was enough to make Artemis squirm. The facade was lined with brushed aluminium, obviously designed to resemble a spaceship, and the doors were of the whoosh *Star Trek* variety. Where was culture? Where was art? How did a monstrosity like this get planning permission in historic London?

A nurse, complete with white uniform and three-pointed hat, was manning the reception. Artemis doubted she was an actual nurse – something about the cigarette between her false nails.

'Excuse me, miss?'

The nurse barely glanced up from her gossip magazine.

'Yes? Are you looking for someone?'

Artemis clenched his fists behind his back.

'Yes, I would like to see Doctor Lane. She is the surgeon, is she

not?’

The nurse ground out her cigarette in an overflowing ashtray.

‘This is not another school project, is it? Doctor Lane says no more projects.’

‘No. Not another school project.’

‘You’re not a lawyer, are you?’ asked the nurse suspiciously. ‘One of those geniuses who gets a degree while they’re still in nappies?’

Artemis sighed. ‘A genius, yes. A lawyer, hardly. I am, mademoiselle, a customer.’

And suddenly the nurse was all charm.

‘Oh, a customer! Why didn’t you say so? I’ll show you right in. Would sir care for tea, coffee or perhaps something stronger?’

‘I am thirteen years old, mademoiselle.’

‘A juice?’

‘Tea would be fine. Earl Grey if you have it. No sugar, obviously; it might make me hyperactive.’

The nurse was quite prepared to accept sarcasm from an actual paying customer, and directed Artemis to a lounge where the style was, again, space age. Plenty of shining velour and eternity mirrors.

Artemis had half finished a cup of something that was most definitely not Earl Grey when Doctor Lane’s door swung open.

‘Do come in,’ said a tall woman uncertainly.

‘Shall I walk?’ asked Artemis. ‘Or will you beam me up?’

The office walls were lined with frames. Along one side were the doctor’s degrees and certificates. Artemis suspected that many of these certificates could be obtained over the weekend. Along the wall were several photographic portraits. Above these read the legend ‘Love Lies Sleeping’. Artemis almost left then, but he was desperate.

Doctor Lane sat behind her desk. She was a very glamorous woman, with flowing red hair and the tapered fingers of an artist. Her smock was Dior. Even Constance Lane’s smile was perfect – too perfect. Artemis looked closer and realized that her entire face was the

handiwork of a plastic surgeon. Obviously, this woman's life was all about cheating time. He had come to the right place.

'Now, young man, Tracy says you wish to become a customer?' The doctor tried to smile, but the stretching made her face shine like a balloon.

'Not personally, no,' replied Artemis. 'But I do wish to rent one of your units. Short term.'

Constance Lane pulled a company pamphlet from the drawer, ringing some figures in red.

'Our rates are quite steep.'

Artemis did not even glance at the numbers.

'Money is no object. We can set up a wire transfer right now from my Swiss bank. In five minutes you can have a hundred thousand pounds sitting in your personal account. All I need is a unit for a single night.'

The figure was impressive. Constance thought of all the nips and tucks it would buy. But she was still reluctant...

'Generally minors are not allowed to commit relatives to our chambers. It's the law actually.'

Artemis leaned forward.

'Doctor Lane. Constance. What I'm doing here is not exactly legal, but no one is being hurt either. One night and you're a rich woman. This time tomorrow and I was never here. No bodies, no complaints.'

The doctor's hand fingered her jaw line.

'One night?'

'Just one. You won't even know we're here.'

Constance took a hand mirror from her desk drawer, studying her reflection closely.

'Call your bank,' she said.

STONEHENGE, WILTSHIRE

Two LEP chutes emerged in the south of England. One in London

itself, but that was closed to the public due to the fact that Chelsea Football Club had built their grounds five hundred metres above the shuttle port.

The other port was in Wiltshire, beside what humans referred to as Stonehenge. Mud People had several theories as to the origins of the structure. These ranged from spaceship landing port to pagan centre of worship. The truth was far less glamorous. Stonehenge had actually been an outlet for a flat-bread-based food. Or, in human terms, a pizza parlour.

A gnome called Bog had realized how many tourists forgot their sandwiches on above-ground jaunts, and so had set up shop beside the terminal. It was a smooth operation. You drove up to one of the windows, named your toppings, and ten minutes later you were stuffing your face. Of course, Bog had to shift his operation below ground once humans began talking in full sentences. And anyway, all that cheese was making the ground soggy. A couple of the service windows had even collapsed.

It was difficult for fairy civilians to get visas to visit Stonehenge because of the constant activity on the surface. Then again, hippies saw fairies every day and it never made the front page. As a police officer, Holly didn't have a visa problem; one flash of the Recon badge opened a hole right through to the surface.

But being a Recon officer didn't help if there was no magma flare scheduled. And the Stonehenge chute had been dormant for over three centuries. Not a spark. In the absence of a hotshot to ride, Holly was forced to travel aboard a commercial shuttle.

The first available shuttle was heavily booked, but luckily there was a late cancellation so Holly wasn't forced to bump a passenger.

The shuttle was a fifty-seater luxury cruiser. It had been commissioned especially by the Brotherhood of Bog to visit their patron's site. These fairies, mostly gnomes, dedicated their lives to pizza and every year on the anniversary of Bog's first day in business, they chartered a shuttle and took a picnic above ground. The picnic consisted of pizza, tuber beer and pizza-flavoured ice cream. Needless

to say, they did not remove their rubber pizza bonnets for the entire day.

So, for sixty-seven minutes, Holly sat wedged between two beer-swilling gnomes singing the pizza song:

*Pizza, pizza,
Fill up your face,
The thicker the pastry,
The better the base!*

There were a hundred and fourteen verses. And it didn't get any better. Holly had never been happier to see the Stonehenge landing lights.

The actual terminal was pretty comprehensive, boasting a three-lane visa clearance booth, entertainment complex and duty-free shopping. The current souvenir craze was a Mud Man hippy doll that said, 'Peace, man,' when you pressed its tummy.

Holly badged her way through the customs queue, taking a security elevator to the surface. Stonehenge had become easier to exit recently, because the Mud People had put up fencing. The humans were protecting their heritage, or so they thought. Strange that Mud People seemed more concerned about the past than the present.

Holly strapped on her wings, and once the control booth had given her the go-ahead, she cleared the airlock, soaring to a height of seven thousand feet. There was plenty of cloud cover, but nevertheless she activated her shield. Nothing could spot her now; she was invisible to human and mechanical eyes. Only rats and two species of monkey could see through a fairy shield.

Holly switched on the on-board navigator in the wings' computer and let the rig do the steering for her. It was nice to be above ground again, and at sunset too. Her favourite time of day. A slow smile spread across her face. In spite of the situation, she was content. This was what she was born to do. Recon. With the wind against her visor and a challenge between her teeth.

KNIGHTSBRIDGE, LONDON

It had been almost two hours since Butler had been shot. Generally the grace period between heart failure and brain damage is about four minutes, but that period can be extended if the patient's body temperature is lowered sufficiently. Drowning victims, for example, can be resuscitated for up to an hour after their apparent death. Artemis could only pray that his makeshift cryogenic chamber could hold Butler in stasis until he could be transferred to one of Ice Age's pods.

Ice Age Cryogenics had a mobile unit for transporting clients from the private clinics where they expired. The van was equipped with its own generator and full surgery. Even if cryogenics was considered crackpot medicine by many physicians, the vehicle itself would meet the strictest standards of equipment and hygiene.

'These units cost almost a million pounds apiece,' Doctor Constance Lane informed Artemis, as they sat in the stark white surgery. A cylindrical cryo pod was strapped to a trolley between them.

'The vans are custom-made in Munich, specially armoured too. This thing could drive over a landmine and come out smiling.'

For once, Artemis was not interested in gathering information.

'That's very nice, Doctor, but can it go any faster? My associate's time is running out. It has already been one hundred and twenty seven-minutes.'

Constance Lane tried to frown, but there wasn't enough slack skin across her brow.

'Two hours. Nobody has ever been revived after that long. Then again, no one has *ever* been revived from a cryogenic chamber.'

The Knightsbridge traffic was, as usual, chaotic. Harrods was running a one-day sale, and the block was crowded with droves of tired customers on their way home. It took a further seventeen minutes to reach En Fin's delivery entrance and, as promised, there were no policemen present, except one. Detective Inspector Justin Barre himself was standing sentry at the rear door. The man was

huge, a descendant of the Zulu nation, according to Butler. It was not difficult to imagine him at Butler's side in some faraway land.

Incredibly, they found a parking space, and Artemis climbed down from the van.

'Cryogenics,' said Barre, noting the vehicle's inscription. 'Do you think you can do anything for him?'

'You looked in the freezer then?' said Artemis.

The officer nodded. 'How could I resist? Curiosity is my business. I'm sorry I checked now; he was a good man.'

'Is a good man,' insisted Artemis. 'I am not ready to give up on him yet.'

Barre stood aside to admit two uniformed Ice Age paramedics.

'According to my men, a group of armed bandits attempted to rob the establishment, but they were interrupted by an earthquake. And if that's what really happened, I'll eat my badge. I don't suppose you can throw any light on the situation?'

'A competitor of mine disagreed with a business strategy. It was a violent disagreement.'

'Who pulled the trigger?'

'Arno Blunt. A New Zealander. Bleached hair, rings in his ears, tattoos on his body and neck. Most of his teeth are missing.'

Barre took a note. 'I'll circulate the description to the airports. You never know, we might catch him.'

Artemis rubbed his eyes.

'Butler saved my life. The bullet was meant for me.'

'That's Butler all right,' said Barre, nodding. 'If there's anything I can do...?'

'You'll be the first to know,' said Artemis. 'Did your officers find anyone on the scene?'

Barre consulted his notebook. 'Some customers and staff. They all checked out, so we let them go. The thieves escaped before we arrived.'

‘No matter. Better I deal with the culprits myself.’

Barre made a concerted effort to ignore the activity in the kitchen behind him.

‘Artemis, can you guarantee this is not going to come back to haunt me? Technically, we’re looking at a homicide.’

Artemis looked Barre in the eye, which was quite an effort.

‘Detective Inspector, no body, no case. And I guarantee that by tomorrow Butler will be alive and kicking. I shall instruct him to call you, if that would set your mind at rest.’

‘It would.’

The paramedics rolled Butler past on a trolley. A frosting of ice covered his face. Tissue damage was already turning his fingers blue.

‘Any surgeon who could fix this would have to be a real magician!’

Artemis glanced downwards.

‘That’s the plan, Detective Inspector. That’s the plan.’

Doctor Lane administered glucose injections in the van.

‘These are to stop the cells collapsing,’ she informed Artemis, massaging Butler’s chest to circulate the medication. ‘Otherwise the water in his blood will freeze in spikes and puncture the cell walls.’

Butler was lying in an open cryo unit, with its own gyroscopes. He had been dressed in a special silver freezer suit, and cold packs were heaped on his body like sachets of sugar in a bowl.

Constance was unaccustomed to people actually paying attention when she explained the process, but this pale youth absorbed facts faster than she could present them.

‘Won’t the water freeze anyway? Glucose can’t prevent that.’

Constance was impressed. ‘Why, yes it will. But in small pieces, so it can float safely between cells.’

Artemis jotted a note in his hand-held computer. ‘Small pieces, I understand.’

‘The glucose is only a temporary measure,’ continued the doctor. ‘The next step is surgery; we need to completely wash out his veins,

and replace the blood with a preservative. Then we can lower the patient's temperature to minus thirty degrees. We'll have to do that back at the institute.'

Artemis shut down his computer. 'No need for that. I just need him held in stasis for a few hours. After that it won't make any difference.'

'I don't think you understand, young man,' said Doctor Lane. 'Current medical practices have not evolved to the point where this kind of injury can be healed. If I don't do a complete blood substitution soon, there will be severe tissue damage.'

The van jolted as a wheel crashed into one of London's numerous potholes. Butler's arm jerked and, for a moment, Artemis could pretend he was alive.

'Don't worry about that, Doctor.'

'But...'

'A hundred thousand pounds, Constance. Just keep repeating that figure to yourself. Park the mobile unit outside and forget all about us. In the morning we'll be gone. Both of us.'

Doctor Lane was surprised.

'Park outside? You don't even want to come in?'

'No, Butler stays outside,' said Artemis. 'My... ah... surgeon, has a problem with dwellings. But may I enter for a moment to use your phone? I need to make a rather special phone call.'

LONDON AIRSPACE

The lights of London were spread out below Holly like the stars of some turbulent galaxy. England's capital was generally a no-fly area for Recon officers, because of the four airports feeding planes into the sky. Five years ago, Captain Trouble Kelp had narrowly missed being impaled by a Heathrow—JFK airbus. Since then, all flight plans involving airport cities had to be cleared personally by Foaly.

Holly spoke into her helmet mike.

'Foaly. Any flights coming in I should know about?'

‘Let me just bring up the radar. OK, let’s see. I’d drop down to five hundred feet if I were you. There’s a 747 coming in from Malaga in a couple of minutes. It won’t hit you, but your helmet computer could interfere with its navigation systems.’

Holly dipped her flaps until she was at the correct altitude. Overhead, the giant jet screamed across the sky. If it hadn’t been for Holly’s sonic filter sponges, both her eardrums would have popped.

‘OK. One jet full of tourists successfully avoided. What now?’

‘Now we wait. I won’t call again unless it’s important.’

They didn’t have to wait long. Less than five minutes later Foaly broke radio silence.

‘Holly. We got something.’

‘Another probe?’

‘No. Something from Sentinel. Hold on, I’m sending the file to your helmet.’

A sound file appeared in Holly’s visor. Its wave resembled a seismograph’s readout.

‘What is it, a phone tap?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Foaly. ‘It’s one of a billion throwaway files that Sentinel sends us every day.’

The Sentinel system was a series of monitoring units that Foaly had piggybacked to obsolete US and Russian satellites. Their function was to monitor all human telecommunications. Obviously, it would be impossible to review every phone call made each day. So the computer was programmed to pick up on certain key words. If, for example, the words ‘fairy’, ‘haven’ and ‘underground’ appeared in a conversation, the computer would flag the call. The more People-related phrases that appeared, the more urgent the rating.

‘This call was made in London minutes ago. It’s loaded with keywords. I’ve never heard anything like it.’

‘Play,’ said Holly clearly, using voice command. A vertical line cursor began scrolling across the sound wave.

‘People,’ said a voice, hazy with distortion. ‘LEP, magic, Haven,

shuttle ports, sprites, B'wa Kell, trolls, time-stop, Recon, Atlantis.'

'That's it?'

'That's not enough? Whoever made that call could be writing our biography.'

'But it's just a string of words. It makes no sense.'

'Hey, there's no point arguing with me,' said the centaur. 'I just collect information. But there has to be a connection to the probe. Two things like this don't just happen on the same day.'

'OK. Do we have an exact location?'

'The call came from a cryogenics institute in London. Sentinel quality is not enough to run a voice-recognition scan. We just know it came from inside the building.'

'Who was our mystery Mud Man calling?'

'Strange thing. He was calling *The Times* newspaper crossword hotline.'

'Maybe those words were the answers to today's crossword?' said Holly hopefully.

'No. I checked the correct solution. Not a fairy-related word in sight.'

Holly set her wings to manual. 'OK. Time to find out what our caller is up to. Send me the institute's coordinates.'

Holly suspected that it was a false alarm. Hundreds of these calls came in every year. Foaly was so paranoid that he believed the Mud People were invading every time someone mentioned the word 'magic' on a phone line. And with the recent trend for human fantasy movies and video games, magical phrases cropped up quite a lot. Thousands of police hours were wasted staking out the dwellings of residents where these phone calls originated, and it usually turned out to be some kid playing on his PC.

More than likely this phantom phone call was the result of a crossed line, or some Hollywood hack pitching a screenplay, or even an undercover LEP operative trying to phone home. But then, today of all days, everything had to be checked.

Holly kicked up her legs behind her, dropping into a steep dive. Diving was against Recon regulations. All approaches were supposed to be controlled and gradual, but what was the point of flying if you couldn't feel the slipstream tugging at your toes?

ICE AGE CRYOGENICS INSTITUTE, LONDON

Artemis leaned against the cryogenics mobile unit's rear bumper. It was funny how quickly a person's priorities could change. This morning he had been worried about which loafers to wear with his suit, and now all he could think about was the fact that his dearest friend's life hung in the balance. And the balance was rapidly shifting.

Artemis wiped a coating of frost from the spectacles he'd retrieved from his bodyguard's jacket. These were no ordinary spectacles. Butler had 20/20 vision. These particular eye glasses had been specially tooled to accommodate filters taken from an LEP helmet. Anti-shield filters. Butler had carried them since Holly Short almost got the jump on him at Fowl Manor.

'You never know,' he'd said. 'We're a threat to LEP security, and some day Commander Root could be replaced with someone who isn't quite so fond of us.'

Artemis wasn't convinced. The fairies were, by and large, a peaceful people. He couldn't believe they would harm anyone, even a Mud Person, on the basis of past crimes. After all, they had parted friends. Or, at least, not enemies.

Artemis presumed the call would work – there was no reason to believe it wouldn't: several government security agencies monitored phone lines using the key word system, recording conversations that could compromise national security. And if humans were doing it, it was a safe bet that Foaly was two steps ahead.

Artemis donned the glasses, climbing into the vehicle's cabin. He had placed the call ten minutes ago. Presuming Foaly got working on a trace straight away, it could still be another two hours before the LEP could get an operative on the surface. That would make it almost

five hours since Butler's heart had stopped. The record for a revival was two hours and fifty minutes for an Alpine skier frozen in an avalanche. There had never been a revival after three hours. Maybe there shouldn't be.

Artemis glanced at the tray of food sent out by Doctor Lane. Any other day he would have complained about virtually everything on the plate, but now the meal was simply sustenance to keep him awake until the cavalry arrived. Artemis took a long drink from a polystyrene cup of tea. It sloshed audibly around his empty stomach. Behind him, in the van's surgery, Butler's cryo unit hummed like a common household freezer. Occasionally the computer emitted electronic beeps and whirrs as the machine ran self-diagnostics. Artemis was reminded of the weeks spent in Helsinki waiting for his father to regain consciousness. Waiting to see what the fairy magic would do to him...

EXCERPT FROM ARTEMIS FOWL'S DIARY. DISK 2. ENCRYPTED.

Today my father spoke to me. For the first time in over two years I heard his voice, and it is exactly as I remembered it. But not everything was the same.

It had been over two months since Holly Short used her healing magic on his battered body, and still he lay in his Helsinki hospital bed. Immobile, unresponsive. The doctors could not understand it.

'He should be awake,' they informed me. 'His brainwaves are strong, exceptionally so. And his heart beats like a horse. It is incredible; this man should be at death's door, yet he has the muscle tone of a twenty-year-old.'

Of course, it is no mystery to me. Holly's magic has overhauled my father's entire being, with the exception of his left leg, which was lost when his ship went down off the coast of Murmansk. He has received an infusion of life, body and mind.

The effect of the magic on his body does not worry me, but I cannot help but wonder what effect this positive energy will have on my father's mind.

For my father, a change like this could be traumatic. He is the Fowl patriarch, and his life revolves around moneymaking.

For sixteen days we sat in my father's hospital room, waiting for some sign of life. I had, by then, learned to read the instruments and noticed immediately the morning that my father's brainwaves began spiking. My diagnosis was that he would soon regain consciousness, and so I called the nurse.

We were ushered from the room to admit a medical team of at least a dozen. Two heart specialists, an anaesthetist, a brain surgeon, a psychologist and several nurses.

In fact, my father had no need of medical attention. He simply sat up, rubbed his eyes and uttered one word: 'Angeline'.

Mother was admitted. Butler, Juliet and I were forced to wait for several more agonizing minutes until she reappeared at the door.

'Come in, everyone,' she said. 'He wants to see you.'

And suddenly I was afraid. My father, the man whose shoes I had been trying to fill for two years, was awake. Would he still live up to my expectations? Would I live up to his?

I entered hesitantly. Artemis Fowl the First was propped up by several pillows. The first thing that I noticed was his face. Not the scar traces – which were already almost completely healed, but the expression. My father's brow, usually a thunderhead of moody contemplation, was smooth and carefree.

After such a long time apart, I didn't know what to say.

My father had no such doubts.

'Arty,' he cried, stretching his arms towards me. 'You're a man now. A young man.'

I ran into his embrace, and while he held me close all plots and schemes were forgotten. I had a father again.

ICE AGE CRYOGENICS INSTITUTE, LONDON

Artemis's memories were interrupted by a sly movement on the wall

above. He peered out the rear window and fixed his gaze on the spot, watching through filtered eyes. There was a fairy crouching on a third-storey window sill: a Recon officer, complete with wings and helmet. After only fifteen minutes! His ruse had worked. Foaly had intercepted the call and sent someone to investigate. Now all that remained was to hope this particular fairy was full to the brim with magic and willing to help.

This had to be handled sensitively. The last thing he wanted to do was spook the Recon officer. One wrong move and he'd wake up in six hours, with absolutely no recollection of the day's events. And that would be fatal for Butler.

Artemis opened the van door slowly, stepping down into the yard. The fairy cocked its head, following his movements. To his dismay, Artemis saw the creature draw a platinum handgun.

'Don't shoot,' said Artemis, raising his hands. 'I am unarmed. And I need your help.'

The fairy activated its wings, descending slowly until its visor was level with Artemis's eyes.

'Do not be alarmed,' continued Artemis. 'I am a friend to the People. I helped to defeat the B'wa Kell. My name is –'

The fairy unshielded, her opaque visor sliding up.

'I know what your name is, Artemis,' said Captain Holly Short.

'Holly,' said Artemis, grasping her by the shoulders. 'It's you.'

Holly shrugged off the human's hands. 'I know it's me. What's going on here? I presume you made the call?'

'Yes, yes. No time for that now. I can explain later.'

Holly opened the throttle on her wings, rising to a height of four metres.

'No, Artemis. I want an explanation now. If you needed help, why didn't you call on your own phone?'

Artemis forced himself to answer the question.

'You told me that Foaly had pulled surveillance on my communications, and anyway I wasn't sure you'd come.'

Holly considered it.

‘OK. Maybe I wouldn’t have.’ Then she noticed. ‘Where’s Butler? Watching our backs as usual, I suppose.’

Artemis didn’t answer, but his expression told Holly exactly why the Mud Boy had summoned her.

Artemis pressed a button, and a pneumatic pump opened the cryo pod’s lid. Butler lay inside, encased in a centimetre of ice.

‘Oh no,’ sighed Holly. ‘What happened?’

‘He stopped a bullet that was meant for me,’ replied Artemis.

‘When are you going to learn, Mud Boy?’ snapped the fairy. ‘Your little schemes have a tendency to get people hurt. Usually the people who care about you.’

Artemis didn’t answer. The truth was the truth after all.

Holly peeled away a cold pack from the bodyguard’s chest.

‘How long?’

Artemis consulted the clock on his mobile phone.

‘Three hours. Give or take a few minutes.’

Captain Short wiped away the ice, laying her hand flat on Butler’s chest.

‘Three hours. I don’t know, Artemis. There’s nothing here. Not a flicker.’

Artemis faced her across the cryo pod.

‘Can you do it, Holly? Can you heal him?’

Holly stepped back. ‘Me? I can’t heal him. We need a professional warlock to even attempt something like this.’

‘But you healed my father.’

‘That was different. Your father wasn’t dead. He wasn’t even critical. I hate to say it, but Butler is gone. Long gone.’

Artemis pulled a gold medallion from a leather thong around his neck. The disc was perforated by a single circular hole. Dead centre.

‘Remember this? You gave it to me for ensuring your trigger finger

got reattached to your hand. You said it would remind me of the spark of decency inside me. I'm trying to do something decent now, Captain.'

'It's not a question of decency. It just can't be done.'

Artemis drummed his fingers on the trolley. Thinking.

'I want to talk to Foaly,' he said finally.

'I speak for the People, Fowl,' said Holly testily. 'We don't take orders from humans.'

'Please, Holly,' said Artemis. 'I can't just let him go. It's Butler.'

Holly couldn't help herself. After all, Butler had saved all their hides on more than one occasion.

'Very well,' she said, fishing a spare com set from her belt. 'But he's not going to have any good news for you.'

Artemis hooked the speaker over one ear, adjusting the mike stem so it wound across his mouth.

'Foaly? Are you listening?'

'Are you kidding?' came the reply. 'This is better than human soap operas.'

Artemis composed himself. He would have to present a convincing case or Butler's last chance was gone.

'All I want is a healing. I accept that it may not work, but what does it cost to try?'

'It's not that straightforward, Mud Boy,' replied the centaur.

'Healing isn't a simple process. It requires talent and concentration. Holly is pretty good, I grant you, but for something like this we need a trained team of warlocks.'

'There's no time,' snapped Artemis. 'Butler has already been under too long. This has to be done now, before the glucose is absorbed into his bloodstream. There is already tissue damage to the fingers.'

'Maybe his brain too?' suggested the centaur.

'No. I got his temperature down in minutes. The cranium has been frozen since the incident.'

‘Are you sure about that? We don’t want to bring Butler’s body back and not his mind.’

‘I’m sure. The brain is fine.’

Foaly didn’t speak for several moments.

‘Artemis, if we agree to try this, I have no idea what the results would be. The effect on Butler’s body could be catastrophic, not to mention his mind. An operation of this kind has never been attempted on a human.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you, Artemis? Do you really? Are you prepared to accept the consequences of this healing? There could be any number of unforeseeable problems. Whatever emerges from this pod is yours to care for. Will you accept this responsibility?’

‘I will,’ said Artemis, without hesitation.

‘Very well, then it’s Holly’s decision. Nobody can force her to use her magic – it’s up to her.’

Artemis lowered his eyes. He could not bring himself to look at the LEP elf.

‘Well, Holly. Will you do it? Will you try?’

Holly brushed the ice from Butler’s brow. He had been a good friend to the People.

‘I’ll try,’ she said. ‘No guarantees, but I’ll do what I can.’

Artemis’s knees almost buckled with relief. Then he was in control again. Time enough for weak knees later.

‘Thank you, Captain. I realize this could not be an easy decision to take. Now, what can I do?’

Holly pointed to the rear doors. ‘You can get out. I need a sterile environment. I’ll come and get you when it’s over. And whatever happens, whatever you hear, don’t come in until I call.’

Holly unclipped her helmet camera, suspending it from the cryo pod’s lid to give Foaly a better view of the patient.

‘How’s that?’

‘Good,’ replied Foaly. ‘I can see the whole upper body. Cryogenics. That Fowl is a genius, for a human. Do you realize that he had less than a minute to come up with this plan? That’s one smart Mud Boy.’

Holly scrubbed her hands thoroughly in the medi-sink.

‘Not smart enough to keep himself out of trouble. I can’t believe I’m doing this. A three-hour healing. This has got to be a first.’

‘Technically it’s only a two-minute healing, if he got the brain down to below zero straight away. But...’

‘But what?’ asked Holly, rubbing her fingers briskly with a towel.

‘But the freezing interferes with the body’s own biorhythms and magnetic fields – things even the People don’t understand fully. There’s more than skin and bone at stake here. We have no idea what a trauma like this could do to Butler.’

Holly stuck her head under the camera.

‘Are you sure this is a good idea, Foaly?’

‘I wish we had time for discussion, Holly, but every second costs our old friend a couple of brain cells. I’m going to talk you through it. The first thing we need to do is to take a look at the wound.’

Holly peeled off several cold packs, unzipping the foil suit. The entry wound was small and black, hidden in the centre of a pool of blood, like a flower’s bud.

‘He never had a chance. Right under the heart. I’m going to zoom in.’

Holly closed her visor, using the helmet’s filters to magnify Butler’s wound.

‘There are fibres trapped in there. Kevlar, I’d say.’

Foaly groaned over the speakers. ‘That’s all we need. Complications.’

‘What difference do fibres make? And this really is not the time for jargon. I need plain Gnommish.’

‘OK. Surgery for morons it is. If you poke your fingers into that wound, the magic will reproduce Butler’s cells, complete with their new strands of Kevlar. He’ll be dead, but completely bulletproof.’

Holly could feel the tension creeping up her back.

‘So, I need to do what?’

‘You need to make a new wound, and let the magic spread from there.’

Oh great, thought Holly, a new wound. Just slice open an old friend.

‘But he’s as hard as rock.’

‘Well then, you’re going to have to melt him down a little. Use your Neutrino 2000, low setting, but not too much. If that brain wakes up before we want it to, he’s finished.’

Holly drew her Neutrino, adjusting the output to minimum.

‘Where do you suggest I melt?’

‘The other pectoral. Be ready to heal; that heat is going to spread rapidly. Butler needs to be healed before oxygen gets to his brain.’

Holly pointed the laser at the bodyguard’s chest.

‘Just say the word.’

‘In a bit closer. Fifteen centimetres approximately. A two-second burst.’

Holly raised her visor, taking several deep breaths. A Neutrino 2000 being used as a medical instrument. Who would have thought it?

Holly pulled her trigger to the first click. One more click would activate the laser.

‘Two seconds.’

‘OK. Go.’

Click. An orange beam of concentrated heat spilled from the Neutrino’s snout, blossoming across Butler’s chest. Had the bodyguard been awake, he would have been knocked unconscious. A neat circle of ice evaporated, rising to condense on the surgery’s ceiling.

‘Now,’ said Foaly, his voice high-pitched with urgency. ‘Narrow the beam and focus it.’

Holly manipulated the gun controls expertly with her thumb.

Narrowing the beam would intensify its power, but the laser would have to be focused at a certain range to avoid slicing right through Butler's body.

'I'm setting it for fifteen centimetres.'

'Good, but hurry; that heat is spreading.'

The colour had returned to Butler's chest and the ice was melting across his body. Holly pulled the trigger again, this time carving a crescent-shaped slit in Butler's flesh. A single drop of blood oozed from between the wound's edges.

'No steady flow,' said Foaly. 'That's good.'

Holly holstered her weapon. 'Now what?'

'Now get your hands in deep, and give it every drop of magic you've got. Don't just let it flow; push the magic out.'

Holly grimaced. She never liked this bit. No matter how many healings she performed, she could never get used to sticking her fingers into other people's insides. She lined her thumbs up, back to back, and slid them into the incision.

'Heal,' she breathed, and the magic scurried down her fingers. Blue sparks hovered over Butler's wound, then disappeared inside, like shooting stars diving behind the horizon.

'More, Holly,' urged Foaly. 'Another shot.'

Holly pushed again, harder. The flow was thick at first, a roiling mass of blue streaks; then, as her magic ebbed, the flow grew weaker.

'That's it,' she panted. 'I have barely enough left to shield on the way home.'

'Well then,' said Foaly, 'stand back until I tell you, because all hell is about to break loose.'

Holly backed up to the wall. Nothing much happened for several moments, then Butler's back arched, throwing his chest into the air. Holly heard a couple of vertebrae groaning.

'That's the heart started,' noted Foaly. 'The easy bit.'

Butler flopped back into the pod, blood flowing from his most recent wound. The magical sparks knitted together, forming a

vibrating lattice over the bodyguard's torso. Butler bounced on the trolley, like a bead in a rattle, as the magic reshaped his atoms. His pores vented mist as toxins were expelled from his system. The coating of ice around him dissolved instantly, causing clouds of steam and then rain, as the water particles condensed on the metal ceiling. Cold packs popped like balloons, sending crystals ricocheting around the surgery. It was like being in the centre of a multicoloured storm.

'You need to get in there now!' said Foaly in Holly's ear.

'What?'

'Get in there. The magic is spreading up his spinal column. Hold his head still for the healing, or any damaged cells could be replicated. And once something's been healed, we can't undo it.'

Great, thought Holly. Hold Butler still. No problem. She battled her way through the debris, cold-pack crystals impacting against her visor.

The human's frame continued thrashing in the cryo pod, shrouded by a cloud of steam.

Holly clamped a hand on either side of Butler's head. The vibrations travelled the length of her arms and through her body.

'Hold him, Holly. Hold him!'

Holly leaned across the pod, placing the weight of her body on the manservant's head. In all the confusion, she couldn't tell if her efforts were having any effect whatsoever.

'Here it comes!' said Foaly in her ear. 'Brace yourself!'

The magical lattice spread along Butler's neck and across his face. Blue sparks targeted the eyes, travelling along the optic nerve, into the brain itself. Butler's eyes flew open, rolling in their sockets. His mouth was reactivated too, spewing out long strings of words in various languages, none of which made any sense.

'His brain is running tests,' said Foaly. 'Just to check everything's working.'

Each muscle and joint was tested to its limit, rolling, swivelling and stretching. Hair follicles grew at an accelerated rate, covering Butler's

normally shaven dome with a thick growth of hair. Nails shot out of his fingers like tiger claws, and a raggedy beard snaked from his chin.

Holly could only hang on. She imagined that this was how it must feel to be a rodeo cowboy straddling a particularly bad-tempered bull.

Eventually the sparks dissipated, spiralling into the air like embers on a breeze. Butler calmed and settled, his body sinking into fifteen centimetres of water and coolant. His breathing was slow and deep.

‘We did it,’ said Holly, sliding off the pod on to her knees. ‘He’s alive.’

‘Don’t start celebrating just yet,’ said Foaly. ‘There’s still a long way to go. He won’t regain consciousness for a couple of days at least, and even then who knows what shape his mind will be in. And, of course, there’s the obvious problem.’

Holly raised her visor. ‘What obvious problem?’

‘See for yourself.’

Captain Short was almost afraid to look at whatever lay in the pod. Grotesque images crowded her imagination. What kind of misshapen mutant human had they created?

The first thing she noticed was Butler’s chest. The bullet hole itself had completely disappeared, but the skin had darkened, with a red line amongst the black. It looked like a capital ‘I’.

‘Kevlar,’ explained Foaly. ‘Some of it must have replicated. Not enough to kill him, thankfully, but enough to slow down his breathing. Butler won’t be running any marathons with those fibres clinging to his ribs.’

‘What’s the red line?’

‘At a guess, I’d say dye. There must have been writing on the original bulletproof jacket.’

Holly glanced around the surgery. Butler’s vest lay discarded in a corner. The letters ‘FBI’ were printed in red across the chest. There was a small hole in the centre of the ‘I’.

‘Ah well,’ said the centaur. ‘It’s a small price to pay for his life. He can pretend it’s a tattoo. They’re very popular among the Mud People

these days.'

Holly had been hoping the Kevlar-reinforced skin was the 'obvious problem' to which Foaly had been referring. But there was something else. The something else became immediately apparent when her gaze landed on the bodyguard's face. Or, more accurately, the hair sprouting from his face.

'Oh gods,' she breathed. 'Artemis is not going to like this.'

Artemis paced the yard while his bodyguard underwent magical surgery. Now that his plan was actually in progress, doubts began to chew at the edges of his mind, like slugs on a leaf. Was this the right thing to do? What if Butler wasn't himself? After all, his father had been undeniably different on the day he had finally come back to them. He would never forget that first conversation...

EXCERPT FROM ARTEMIS FOWL'S DIARY. DISK 2. ENCRYPTED.

The doctors in Helsinki were determined that they should pump my father full of vitamin supplements. He was just as determined that they shouldn't. And a determined Fowl usually gets his way.

'I am perfectly fine,' he insisted. 'Please allow me some time to reacquaint myself with my family.'

The doctors withdrew, disarmed by his personality. I was surprised by this approach. Charm had never been my father's weapon of choice. He had previously achieved his aims by bulldozing over anybody stupid enough to stand in his way.

Father was sitting in the hospital room's only armchair, his shortened leg resting on a footstool. My mother was perched on the armrest, resplendent in white faux fur.

Father caught me looking at his leg.

'Don't worry, Arty,' he said. 'I'm being measured for a prosthetic tomorrow. Doctor Hermann Gruber is being flown in from Dortmund.'

I had heard of Gruber. He worked with the German Paralympics squad. The best.

'I'm going to ask for something sporty. Maybe with speed stripes.'

A joke. That wasn't like my father.

My mother ruffled my father's hair.

'Stop teasing, darling. This is difficult for Arty, you know. He was only a baby when you left.'

'Hardly a baby, Mother', I said. 'I was eleven, after all.'

My father smiled at me fondly. Perhaps now would be an appropriate time for us to talk, before his good mood wore off to be replaced by the usual gruffness?

'Father, things have changed since your disappearance. I have changed.'

Father nodded solemnly. 'Yes, you are right. We need to talk about the business.'

Ah yes. Back to business. This was the father I remembered.

'I think you will find that the family bank accounts are healthy, and I trust you will approve of the stocks portfolio. It has yielded an eighteen per cent dividend in the past financial year. Eighteen per cent is quite exemplary in the current market; I haven't failed you.'

'I have failed you, son,' said Artemis Senior, 'if you think bank accounts and stocks are all that's important. You must have learned that from me.' He pulled me close to him. *'I haven't been the perfect father, Arty, far from it. Too busy with the family business. I was always taught that it was my duty to manage the Fowl empire. A criminal empire, as we both know. If any good has come out of my abduction, it's that I have reassessed my priorities. I want a new life for us all.'*

I could not believe what I was hearing. One of my most persistent memories was of Father repeatedly quoting the family motto, 'aurum potestas est' – 'Gold is power'. And now, here he was, turning his back on Fowl principles. What had the magic done to him?

'Gold isn't all-important, Arty,' he continued. 'Neither is power. We have everything we need right here. The three of us.'

I was utterly surprised. But not unpleasantly so.

'But, Father. You have always said... This isn't you. You're a new man.'

Mother joined the conversation. 'No, Arty. Not a new man. An old one.'

The one I fell in love with and married, before the Fowl empire took over. And now I have him back; we're a family again.'

I looked at my parents – how happy they were together. A family? Was it possible that the Fowls could be a normal family?

Artemis was yanked back to the present by a commotion from inside the Ice Age mobile unit. The vehicle began to rock on its axles, blue light crackling from beneath the door.

Artemis did not panic. He had seen healings before. Last year, when Holly reattached her index finger, the magical fallout had shattered half a ton of ice – and that was for one little finger. Imagine the damage Butler's system could do repairing a critical injury.

The pandemonium continued for several minutes, popping two of the van's tyres, and completely wrecking the suspension. Luckily the institute was locked up for the night or Doctor Lane would certainly be adding automobile repairs to her bill.

Eventually the magical storm subsided, and the vehicle settled like a rollercoaster car after the ride. Holly opened the rear door, leaning heavily against the frame. She was exhausted, drained. A sickly pallor glowed through her coffee complexion.

'Well?' demanded Artemis. 'Is he alive?'

Holly didn't answer. A strenuous healing often resulted in nausea and fatigue. Captain Short took several deep breaths, resting on the rear bumper.

'Is he alive?' repeated the youth.

Holly nodded. 'Alive. Yes, he's alive. But...'

'But what, Holly? Tell me!'

Holly tugged off her helmet. It slipped from her fingers, rolling across the yard.

'I'm sorry, Artemis. I did the best I could.'

It was possibly the worst thing she could have said.

Artemis climbed into the van. The floor was slick with water and coloured crystals. Smoke leaked from the fractured grille of the air-conditioning system, and the overhead neon strip flickered like lightning in a bottle.

The cryo pod lay off-kilter in one corner, its gyroscopes leaking fluid. One of Butler's arms flopped over the unit's edge, throwing a monster shadow on the wall.

The cryo pod's instruments panel was still operating. Artemis was relieved to see the heartbeat icon blipping gently in the display. Butler was alive! Holly had done it again! But something had been worrying the fairy captain. There was a problem.

As soon as Artemis looked inside the pod it became immediately apparent what that problem was. The manservant's newly grown hair was heavily streaked with grey: Butler had gone into the cryo chamber forty years of age; the man before Artemis now was at least fifty. Possibly older. In the space of just over three hours Butler had grown old.

Holly appeared at Artemis's shoulder.

'He's alive at least,' said the fairy.

Artemis nodded. 'When will he wake up?'

'A couple of days. Maybe.'

'How did this happen?' asked the boy, brushing a lock of hair from Butler's brow.

Holly shrugged. 'I'm not exactly sure. That's Foaly's area.'

Artemis took the spare com set from his pocket, hooking the speaker wire over his ear.

'Any theories, Foaly?'

'I can't be sure,' the centaur replied. 'But I'm guessing that Holly's magic wasn't enough. Some of Butler's own life force was needed for the healing. About fifteen years' worth by the looks of it.'

'Can anything be done?'

'Afraid not. A healing can't be undone. If it's any consolation, he'll probably live longer than he would have done naturally. But there's

no reclaiming his youth and, what's more, we can't be sure about the state of his mind. The healing could have wiped his brain cleaner than a magnetized disk.'

Artemis sighed deeply. 'What have I done to you, old friend?'

'No time for that,' said Holly briskly. 'You should both get out of here. I'm sure all the commotion will have attracted attention. Do you have transport?'

'No. We flew over on a public flight. Then took a taxi from Heathrow.'

Holly shrugged. 'I'd like to help, Artemis, but I've already given up enough time here. I'm on a mission. An extremely important mission and I have to get back to it.'

Artemis stepped away from the cryo unit.

'Holly, about your mission...'

Captain Short turned slowly.

'Artemis...'

'You were probed, weren't you? Something got past Foaly's defences?'

Holly pulled a large sheet of camouflage foil from her surveillance backpack.

'We need to go somewhere to talk. Somewhere private.'

The following forty-five minutes were something of a blur for Artemis. Holly wrapped both humans in the camouflage foil and clipped them on to her Moonbelt. The belt effectively reduced their weight to one fifth of the Earth's norm.

Even then it was a struggle for her mechanical wings to hoist the three of them into the night sky. Holly had to open the throttle wide just to bring them five hundred feet above sea level.

'I'm going to shield now,' she said into her mike. 'Try not to thrash about too much. I don't want to have to cut one of you loose.'

Then she was gone, and in her place hovered a slightly shimmering, Holly-shaped patch of stars. The vibrations rattled through the belt

links, shaking Artemis's teeth in his head. He felt like a bug in a cocoon, trussed up in foil, with only his face exposed to the night air. Initially, the experience was almost enjoyable, riding high above the city, watching the cars flicker along the motorways. Then Holly picked up a westerly wind and threw them into the air currents over the sea.

Suddenly Artemis's universe was a maelstrom of cutting winds, buffeting passengers and startled birds. Beside him, Butler hung limply in his makeshift foil truss. The foil absorbed the local colours, reflecting the dominant hues. It was by no means a perfect recreation of the surroundings, but certainly good enough for a night flight over the sea to Ireland.

'Is this foil invisible to radar?' said Artemis into the headset. 'I don't want to be mistaken for a UFO by some eager Harrier jump-jet pilot.'

Holly considered it. 'You're right. Maybe I should take us down a bit, just in case.'

Two seconds later, Artemis deeply regretted breaking radio silence: Holly tilted her wing rig into a steep dive, sending the three of them hurtling towards the midnight waves below. She pulled up at the last moment, when Artemis could have sworn the skin was about to peel away from his face.

'Low enough for you?' asked Holly, with the barest hint of humour in her voice.

They skimmed the wave tops, spray sparking against the camouflage foil. The ocean was rough that night, and Holly followed the water patterns, dipping and climbing to match the swell's curve. A school of humpbacked whales sensed their presence and broke through the storm foam, leaping fully thirty metres across a trough before disappearing beneath the black water. There were no dolphins. The small mammals were taking shelter from the elements in the inlets and coves along the Irish coast.

Holly skirted the hull of a passenger ferry, flying close enough to feel the engine's pulse. On deck, scores of passengers vomited over the railings, narrowly missing the invisible travellers below.

‘Charming,’ muttered Artemis.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Holly’s voice, out of thin air. ‘Almost there.’

They passed Rosslare’s ferry terminal, following the coastline northwards, over the Wicklow mountains. Even in his disorientated state, Artemis could not help but marvel at their speed. Those wings were a fantastic invention. Imagine the money that could be made for a patent like that. Artemis stopped himself. Selling fairy technology was what had got Butler hurt in the first place.

They slowed sufficiently for Artemis to make out individual landmarks. Dublin squatted to the east, an aura of yellow light buzzing over its highway system. Holly skirted the city, heading for the less populated north of the county. In the centre of a large dark patch sat a single building, painted white by external spotlights: Artemis’s ancestral home, Fowl Manor.

FOWL MANOR, DUBLIN, IRELAND

‘Now, explain yourself,’ said Holly, once they had floated Butler safely to bed.

She sat on the great stairway’s bottom step. Generations of Fowls glared down at her from oil portraits on the walls. The LEP captain activated her helmet mike and switched it to loudspeaker.

‘Foaly, record this, would you? I have a feeling we’re going to want to hear it again.’

‘This entire incident began at a business meeting this afternoon,’ began Artemis.

‘Go on.’

‘I was meeting Jon Spiro, an American industrialist.’

Holly heard keys being tapped in her ear. Undoubtedly Foaly was running a background check on this Spiro character.

‘Jon Spiro,’ said the centaur, almost immediately. ‘A shady character, even by human standards. Mud Man security agencies have been trying to put this guy away for thirty years. His companies are eco-disasters. And that’s only the tip of the iceberg: industrial

espionage, abduction, blackmail, mob connections. You name it, he's gotten away with it.'

'That's the chap,' said Artemis. 'So, I set up a rendezvous with Mister Spiro.'

'What were you selling?' interrupted Foaly. 'A man like Spiro doesn't cross the Atlantic for tea and muffins.'

Artemis frowned. 'I wasn't actually selling him anything. But I did offer to suppress some revolutionary technology, for a price, of course.'

Foaly's voice was cold: 'What revolutionary technology?'

Artemis hesitated for a beat. 'Do you remember those helmets Butler took from the Retrieval squad?'

Holly groaned. 'Oh no.'

'I deactivated the helmets' auto-destruct mechanisms and constructed a cube from the sensors and chips: the C Cube, a mini-computer. It was a simple matter to install a fibre-optic blocker so that you couldn't take control of the Cube if you detected it.'

'You gave fairy technology to a man like Jon Spiro?'

'I quite obviously didn't give it to him,' snapped Artemis. 'He took it.'

Holly pointed a finger at the youth. 'Don't bother playing the victim, Artemis. It doesn't suit you. What did you think? That Jon Spiro was going to walk away from technology that could make him the richest man on the face of the planet?'

'So it was your computer that pinged us?' said Foaly.

'Yes,' admitted Artemis. 'Unintentionally. Spiro asked for a surveillance scan, and the Cube's fairy circuits picked up LEP satellite beams.'

'Can't we block any future probes?' asked the LEP captain.

'Haven's deflectors will be useless against our own technology. Sooner or later, Spiro will find out about the People. And if that happens, I can't see a man like him just allowing us to live in harmony.'

Holly glared pointedly at Artemis.

‘Remind you of anyone?’

‘I am nothing like Jon Spiro,’ objected the boy. ‘He’s a cold-blooded killer!’

‘Give yourself a few years,’ said Holly. ‘You’ll get there.’

Foaly sighed. Put Artemis Fowl and Holly Short together in a room and sooner or later there was bound to be a row.

‘OK, Holly,’ said the centaur. ‘Let’s try to act like professionals. Step one is to call off the lockdown. Our next priority is to retrieve the Cube before Spiro can unlock its secrets.’

‘We do have some time,’ said Artemis. ‘The Cube is encrypted.’

‘How encrypted?’

‘I built an Eternity Code into its hard drive.’

‘An Eternity Code,’ said Foaly. ‘I’m impressed.’

‘It wasn’t that difficult. I invented an entirely new base language, so Spiro will have no frame of reference.’

Holly was feeling a bit left out. ‘And how long will it take to crack this Eternity Code?’

Artemis couldn’t resist raising an eyebrow.

‘Eternity,’ he said. ‘In theory, but with Spiro’s resources, quite a bit less.’

Holly ignored the tone. ‘OK then, we’re safe. No need to go hunting Spiro if all he has is a box of useless circuits.’

‘Far from useless,’ countered Artemis. ‘The chip design alone will lead his research and development team in interesting directions. But you are right about one thing, Holly, there is no need to go hunting Spiro. Once he realizes that I am still alive, he will come looking for me. After all, I am the only one who can unlock the full potential of the C Cube.’

Holly dropped her head into her hands. ‘So, any moment now a team of hit men could come blasting in here, looking for the key to your Eternity Code. It’s at times like these we could do with someone

like Butler.'

Artemis plucked the wall phone from its cradle.

'There's more than one Butler in the family,' he said.

CHAPTER 4: RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

SFAX, TUNISIA, NORTH AFRICA



FOR her eighteenth birthday, Juliet Butler asked for, and received, a ribbed Judo crash vest, two weighted throwing knives and a World Wrestling Grudge Match video – items that did not generally feature on the average teenage girl’s wish list. Then again, Juliet Butler was not the average teenage girl.

Juliet was extraordinary in many ways. For one thing, she could hit a moving target with any weapon you cared to name and, for another, she could throw most people a lot further than she trusted them.

Of course, she didn’t learn all of this watching wrestling videos. Juliet’s training began at age four. After kindergarten each day, Domovoi Butler would escort his little sister to the Fowl Estate dojo, where he instructed her in the various forms of martial arts. By the time she was eight, Juliet was a third dan black belt in seven disciplines. By eleven years of age, she was beyond belts.

Traditionally, all Butler males enrolled in Madame Ko’s Personal Protection Academy on their tenth birthday, spending six months of every year learning the bodyguard’s craft, and the other six guarding a low-risk principal. The female Butlers generally went into the service of various wealthy families around the world. However, Juliet decided she would combine both roles, spending half the year with Angeline Fowl, and the other half honing her martial arts skills in Madame Ko’s camp. She was the first Butler female to enrol in the

Academy, and only the fifth female ever to make it past the physical exam. The camp was never located in the same country for more than five years. Butler had done his training in Switzerland and Israel, but his younger sister received her instruction in the Utsukushigahara Highlands in Japan.

Madame Ko's dormitory was a far cry from the luxurious accommodation in Fowl Manor. In Japan, Juliet slept on a straw mat, owned nothing apart from two rough cotton robes, and consumed only rice, fish and protein shakes.

The day began at five thirty when Juliet and the other acolytes ran four miles to the nearest stream, catching fish with their bare hands. Having cooked and presented the fish to their sensei, the acolytes strapped empty twenty-gallon barrels to their backs and climbed to the snowline. When their barrel was filled with snow the acolyte would roll it back to base camp, and then pound the snow with bare feet until it melted and could be used by the sensei to bathe. Then the day's training could begin.

Lessons included *Cos Ta'pa*, a martial art developed by Madame Ko herself, specially tailored for bodyguards, whose primary aim was not self-defence, but defence of the principal. Acolytes also studied advanced weaponry, information technology, vehicular maintenance and hostage-negotiation techniques.

By her eighteenth birthday, Juliet could break down and reassemble ninety per cent of the world's production weapons blindfolded, operate any vehicle, do her make-up in under four minutes and, in spite of her stunning Asian and European gene mix, blend into any crowd like a native. Her big brother was very proud.

The final step in her training was a field simulation in a foreign environment. If she passed this test, Madame Ko would have Juliet's shoulder marked with a blue diamond tattoo. The tattoo, identical to the one on Butler's shoulder, symbolized not only the graduate's toughness, but also the multifaceted nature of his or her training. In personal protection circles, a bodyguard bearing the blue diamond needed no further reference.

Madame Ko had chosen the city of Sfax in Tunisia for Juliet's final assessment. Her mission was to guide the principal through the city's tumultuous market or medina. Generally, a bodyguard would advise his principal against venturing into such a densely populated area, but Madame Ko pointed out that principals rarely listened to advice, and it was best to be prepared for every eventuality. And, as if Juliet wasn't under enough pressure, Madame Ko herself decided to act as surrogate principal.

It was exceptionally hot in North Africa. Juliet squinted through her wraparound sunglasses, concentrating on following the diminutive figure bobbing through the crowd before her.

'Hurry,' snapped Madame Ko. 'You will lose me.'

'In your dreams, Madame,' replied Juliet, unperturbed. Madame Ko was simply trying to distract her with conversation. And there were already enough distractions in the local environment. Gold hung in shimmering ropes from a dozen stalls; Tunisian rugs flapped from wooden frames, the perfect cover for an assassin. Locals pressed uncomfortably close, eager for a look at this attractive female, and the terrain was treacherous – one false step could lead to a twisted ankle and failure.

Juliet processed all this information automatically, factoring it into every move. She placed a firm hand on the chest of a teenager grinning at her, skipped over an oily puddle reflecting rainbow patterns and followed Madame Ko down yet another alley in the medina's endless maze.

Suddenly there was a man in her face. One of the market traders.

'I have good carpets,' he said in broken French. 'You come with me. I show you!'

Madame Ko kept going. Juliet attempted to follow her, but the man blocked her path.

'No, thank you. I am so not interested. I live outdoors.'

'Very funny, *mademoiselle*. You make good joke. Now come and see Ahmed's carpets.'

The crowd began to take notice, swirling to face her, like the tendrils of a giant organism. Madame Ko was moving further away. She was losing the principal.

‘I said no. Now back off, Mister Carpet Man. Don’t make me break a nail.’

The Tunisian was unaccustomed to taking orders from a female, and now his friends were watching.

‘I give good bargain,’ he persisted, pointing at his stall. ‘Best rugs in Sfax.’

Juliet dodged to one side, but the crowd moved to cut her off.

It was at this point that Ahmed lost any sympathy that Juliet might have had for him. Up to now, he had simply been an innocent local in the wrong place at the wrong time. But now...

‘Let’s go,’ said the Tunisian, wrapping an arm around the blonde girl’s waist. Not an idea that would make it on to his top ten of good ideas.

‘Oh, bad move, Carpet Man!’

Faster than the eye could blink, Ahmed was wrapped in the folds of a nearby carpet and Juliet was gone. Nobody had a clue what had happened until they replayed the incident on the screen of Kamal the chicken man’s camcorder. In slo-mo, the traders saw the Eurasian girl hoist Ahmed by the throat and belt, and lob him bodily into a carpet stall. It was a move that one of the gold merchants recognized as a Slingshot, a manoeuvre made popular by the American wrestler Papa Hog. The traders laughed so much that several of them became dehydrated. It was the funniest thing to happen all year. The clip even won a prize on Tunisia’s version of the *World’s Funniest Videos*. Three weeks later, Ahmed moved to Egypt.

Back to Juliet. The bodyguard-in-training ran like a sprinter out of the blocks, dodging around stunned merchants and hanging a hard right down an alley. Madame Ko couldn’t have gone far. She could still complete her assignment.

Juliet was furious with herself. This was exactly the kind of stunt

her brother had warned her about.

‘Watch out for Madame Ko,’ Butler had advised. ‘You never know what she’ll cook up for a field assignment. I heard that she once stampeded a herd of elephants in Calcutta, just to distract an acolyte.’

The trouble was that you couldn’t be sure. That carpet merchant might have been in Madame Ko’s employ, or he might have been an innocent civilian, who happened to stick his nose in where it didn’t belong.

The alley narrowed so that the human traffic ran single file. Makeshift clothes lines zigzagged at head height; *gutras* and *abayas* hung limp and steaming in the heat. Juliet ducked below the laundry, dodging around dawdling shoppers. Startled turkeys hopped as far out of the way as their string leads would allow.

And suddenly she was in a clearing. A dim square surrounded by three-storey houses. Men lounged on the upper balconies, puffing on fruit-flavoured water pipes. Underfoot was a priceless chipped mosaic, depicting a Roman bath scene.

In the centre of the square, lying with her knees hugged to her chest, was Madame Ko. She was being assaulted by three men. These were no local traders. All three wore special-forces black, and attacked with the assurance and accuracy of trained professionals. This was no test. These men were actually trying to kill her sensei.

Juliet was unarmed; this was one of the rules. To smuggle arms into the African country would automatically mean life imprisonment. Luckily, it seemed as though her adversaries were also without weapons, though hands and feet would certainly be sufficient for the job they had in mind.

Improvisation was the key to survival here. There was no point in attempting a straight assault. If these three had subdued Madame Ko, then they would be more than a match for her in regular combat. Time to try something a bit unorthodox.

Juliet leaped on the run, snagging a clothes line on her way past. The ring resisted for a second, then popped out of the dried plaster. The cable played out behind her, sagging with its load of rugs and

headscarves. Juliet veered left as far as the line's other anchor would allow, and then swung round towards the men.

'Hey, boys!' she yelled, not from bravado, but because this would work better head on.

The men looked up just in time to get a faceful of sopping camel hair. The heavy rugs and garments wrapped themselves around their flailing limbs, and the nylon cable caught them below the chins. In under a second the three were down. And Juliet made certain they stayed down with pinches to the nerve clusters at the base of their necks.

'Madame Ko!' she cried, searching the laundry for her sensei. The old woman lay shuddering in an olive dress, a plain headscarf covering her face.

Juliet helped the woman to her feet.

'Did you see that move, Madame? I totally decked those morons. I bet they never saw anything like that before. Improvisation. Butler always says it's the key. You know, I think my eyeshadow distracted them. Glitter green. Never fails...'

Juliet stopped talking because there was a knife at her throat. The knife was wielded by Madame Ko herself, who was in fact not Madame Ko, but some other tiny Oriental lady in an olive dress. A decoy.

'You are dead,' said the lady.

'Yes,' agreed Madame Ko, stepping from the shadows. 'And if you are dead, then the principal is dead. And you have failed.'

Juliet bowed low, joining her hands.

'That was a sly trick, Madame,' she said, trying to sound respectful.

Her sensei laughed. 'Of course. That is the way of life. What did you expect?'

'But those assassins; I completely kicked their b—; I defeated them comprehensively.'

Madame Ko dismissed the claim with a wave. 'Luck. Fortunately for you, these were not assassins, but three graduates of the Academy.'

What was that nonsense with the wire?’

‘It’s a wrestling trick,’ said Juliet. ‘It’s called the Clothes Line.’

‘Unreliable,’ said the Japanese lady. ‘You succeeded because fortune was with you. Fortune is not enough in our business.’

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ protested Juliet. ‘There was this guy in the market. Totally in my face. I had to put him asleep for a while.’

Madame Ko tapped Juliet between the eyes. ‘Quiet, girl. Think for once. What should you have done?’

Juliet bowed an inch lower. ‘I should have incapacitated the merchant immediately.’

‘Exactly. His life means nothing. Insignificant compared to the principal’s safety.’

‘I can’t just kill innocent people,’ protested Juliet.

Madame Ko sighed. ‘I know, child. And that is why you are not ready. You have all the skill, but you lack focus and resolve. Perhaps next year.’

Juliet’s heart plummeted. Her brother had earned the blue diamond at eighteen years of age. The youngest graduate in the Academy’s history. She had been hoping to equal that feat. Now she would have to try again in twelve months. It was pointless to object any further. Madame Ko never reversed a decision.

A young woman in acolyte’s robes emerged from the alley, holding a small briefcase.

‘Madame,’ she said, bowing. ‘There is a call for you on the satellite phone.’

Madame Ko took the offered handset and listened intently for several moments.

‘A message from Artemis Fowl,’ she said eventually.

Juliet itched to straighten from her bow, but it would be an unforgivable breach of protocol.

‘Yes, Madame?’

‘The message is: Domovoi needs you.’

Juliet frowned. 'You mean Butler needs me.'

'No,' said Madame Ko, without a trace of emotion. 'I mean Domovoi needs you. I am just repeating what was told to me.'

And suddenly Juliet could feel the sun pounding on her neck, and she could hear the mosquitoes whining in her ears like dentist drills, and all she wanted to do was straighten up and run all the way to the airport. Butler would never have revealed his name to Artemis. Not unless... No, she couldn't believe it. She couldn't even allow herself to think it.

Madame Ko tapped her chin thoughtfully. 'You are not ready. I should not let you leave. You are too emotionally involved to be an effective bodyguard.'

'Please, Madame,' said Juliet.

Her sensei considered it for two long minutes.

'Very well,' she said. 'Go.'

Juliet was gone before the word finished echoing around the square, and heaven help any carpet merchant who blocked her path.

CHAPTER 5: THE METAL MAN AND THE MONKEY

THE SPIRO NEEDLE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA



Jon Spiro took the Concorde from Heathrow to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. A stretch limousine ferried him downtown to the Spiro Needle, a sliver of steel and glass rising eighty-six storeys above the Chicago skyline. Spiro Industries was located on floors fifty through to eighty-five. The eighty-sixth floor was Spiro's personal residence, accessible either by private lift or helipad.

Jon Spiro hadn't slept for the entire journey, too excited by the little cube sitting in his briefcase. The head of his technical staff was equally excited when Spiro informed him what this harmless-looking box was capable of, and immediately scurried off to unravel the C Cube's secrets. Six hours later he scurried back to the conference room for a meeting.

'It's useless,' said the scientist, whose name was Doctor Pearson.

Spiro swirled an olive in his martini glass.

'I don't think so, Pearson,' he said. 'In fact, I know that little gizmo is anything but useless. I think that maybe you're the useless one in this equation.'

Spiro was in a terrible mood. Arno Blunt had just called to inform him of Fowl's survival. When Spiro was in a dark mood people had been known to disappear off the face of the earth, if they were lucky.

Pearson could feel the stare of the conference room's third occupant bouncing off his head. This was not a woman you wanted angry with you: Pearson knew that if Jon Spiro decided to have him thrown out the window, this particular individual would have no problem signing an affidavit swearing that he had jumped.

Pearson chose his words carefully. 'This device –'

'The C Cube. That's what it's called. I told you that, so use the name.'

'This C Cube undoubtedly has enormous potential. But it's encrypted.'

Spiro threw the olive at his head scientist. It was a humiliating experience for a Nobel Prize winner.

'So break the encryption. What do I pay you guys for?'

Pearson could feel his heart rate speeding up. 'It's not that simple. This code. It's unbreakable.'

'Let me get this straight,' said Spiro, leaning back in his ox-blood leather chair. 'I'm putting two hundred million a year into your department, and you can't break one lousy code, set up by a kid?'

Pearson was trying not to think about the sound his body would make hitting the pavement. His next sentence would save him or damn him.

'The Cube is voice-activated, and coded to Artemis Fowl's voice patterns. Nobody can break the code. It's not possible.'

Spiro did not respond; it was a signal to continue.

'I've heard of something like this. We scientists theorize about it. An Eternity Code, it's called. The code has millions of possible permutations and, not only that, it's based on an unknown language. It seems as though this boy has created a language that is spoken only by him. We don't even know how it corresponds to English. A code like this is not even supposed to exist. If Fowl is dead, then I'm sorry to say, Mister Spiro, the C Cube died with him.'

Jon Spiro stuck a cigar into the corner of his mouth. He did not light it. His doctors had forbidden it. Politely.

‘And if Fowl were alive?’

Pearson knew a lifeline when it was being thrown to him.

‘If Fowl were alive, he would be a lot easier to break than an Eternity Code.’

‘OK, Doc,’ said Spiro. ‘You’re dismissed. You don’t want to hear what’s coming next.’

Pearson gathered his notes and hurried for the door. He tried not to look at the face of the woman at the table. If he didn’t hear what came next, he could kid himself that his conscience was clear. And if he didn’t actually see the woman at the conference table, then he couldn’t pick her out of a line-up.

‘It looks like we have a problem,’ said Spiro to the woman in the dark suit.

The woman nodded. Everything she wore was black. Black power suit, black blouse, black stilettos. Even the Rado watch on her wrist was jet black.

‘Yes. But it’s my kind of problem.’

Carla Frazetti was god-daughter to Spatz Antonelli, who ran the downtown section of the Antonelli crime family. Carla operated as liaison between Spiro and Antonelli, possibly the two most powerful men in Chicago. Spiro had learned early in his career that businesses allied to the Mob tended to flourish.

Carla checked her manicured nails.

‘It seems to me that you only have one option: you nab the Fowl kid and squeeze him for this code.’

Spiro sucked on his unlit cigar, thinking about it.

‘It’s not that straightforward. The kid runs a tight operation. Fowl Manor is like a fortress.’

Carla smiled. ‘This is a thirteen-year-old kid we’re talking about, right?’

‘He’ll be fourteen in six months,’ said Spiro defensively. ‘Anyway, there are complications.’

‘Such as?’

‘Arno is injured. Somehow Fowl blew his teeth out.’

‘Ouch,’ said Carla, wincing.

‘He can’t even stand in a breeze, never mind head up an operation.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘In fact, the kid incapacitated all my best people. They’re on a dental plan too. It’s going to cost me a fortune. No, I need some outside help on this one.’

‘You want to contract the job to us?’

‘Exactly. But it’s got to be the right people. Ireland is an old-world kind of place. Wise guys are going to stick out a mile. I need guys who blend in and can persuade a kid to accompany them back here. Easy money.’

Carla winked. ‘I read you, Mister Spiro.’

‘So, you got guys like that? Guys who can take care of business without drawing attention to themselves?’

‘The way I see it, you need a metal man and a monkey?’

Spiro nodded, familiar with Mob slang. A metal man carried the gun, and a monkey got into hard-to-reach places.

‘We have two such men on our books. I can guarantee they won’t attract the wrong kind of attention in Ireland. But it won’t be cheap.’

‘Are they good?’ asked Spiro.

Carla smiled. One of her incisors was inset with a tiny ruby.

‘Oh, they’re good,’ she replied. ‘These guys are the best.’

THE METAL MAN

THE INK BLOT TATTOO PARLOUR, DOWNTOWN CHICAGO

Loafers McGuire was having a tattoo done. A skull’s head in the shape of the ace of spades. It was his own design and he was very proud of it. So proud, in fact, that he’d wanted the tattoo on his neck. Inky Burton, the tattooist, managed to change Loafers’ mind, arguing that

neck tattoos were better than a name tag when the cops wanted to ID a suspect. Loafers relented. 'OK,' he'd said. 'Put it on my forearm.'

Loafers had a tattoo done after every job. There wasn't much skin left on his body that still retained its original colour. That was how good Loafers McGuire was at his job.

Loafers' real name was Aloysius, and he hailed from the Irish town of Kilkenny. He'd come up with the nickname Loafers himself, because he thought it sounded more Mob-like than Aloysius. All his life, Loafers had wanted to be a mobster, just like in the movies. When his efforts to start a Celtic mafia had failed Loafers came to Chicago.

The Chicago Mob welcomed him with open arms. Actually, one of their enforcers grabbed him in a bear-hug. Loafers sent the man and six of his buddies to the Mother of Mercy Hospital. Not bad for a guy five feet tall. Eight hours after stepping off the plane, Loafers was on the payroll.

And here he was, two years and several jobs later, already the organization's top metal man. His specialities were robbery and debt collection. Not the usual line of work for five-footers. But then, Loafers was not the usual five-footer.

Loafers leaned back in the tattooist's adjustable chair.

'You like the shoes, Inky?'

Inky blinked sweat from his eyes. You had to be careful with Loafers. Even the most innocent question could be a trap. One wrong answer and you could find yourself making your excuses to Saint Peter.

'Yeah. I like 'em. What are they called?'

'Loafers!' snapped the tiny gangster. 'Loafers, idiot. They're my trademark.'

'Oh yeah, loafers. I forgot. Cool, havin' a trademark.'

Loafers checked the progress on his arm.

'You ready with that needle yet?'

'Just ready,' replied Inky. 'I'm finished painting on the guidelines. I

just gotta put in a fresh needle.’

‘It’s not gonna hurt, is it?’

Of course it is, moron, thought Inky. I’m sticking a needle in your arm.

But out loud he said, ‘Not too much. I gave your arm a swab of anaesthetic.’

‘It better not hurt,’ warned Loafers. ‘Or you’ll be hurting shortly afterwards.’

Nobody threatened Inky except Loafers McGuire. Inky did all the Mob’s tattoo work. He was the best in the state.

Carla Frazetti pushed through the door. Her black-suited elegance seemed out of place in the dingy establishment.

‘Hello, boys,’ she said.

‘Hello, Miss Carla,’ said Inky, blushing deeply. You didn’t get too many ladies in the Ink Blot.

Loafers jumped to his feet. Even he respected the boss’s god-daughter.

‘Miss Frazetti. You could have beeped me. No need for you to come down to this dump.’

‘No time for that. This is urgent. You leave straight away.’

‘I’m leaving? Where am I going?’

‘Ireland. Your Uncle Pat is sick.’

Loafers frowned.

‘Uncle Pat? I don’t have an Uncle Pat.’

Carla tapped the toe of one stiletto.

‘He’s sick, Loafers. Real sick, if you catch my drift.’

Loafers finally caught on.

‘Oh, I get it. So I gotta pay him a visit.’

‘That’s it. That’s exactly how sick he is.’

Loafers used a rag to clean the ink off his arm.

‘OK, I’m ready. Are we going straight to the airport?’

Carla linked the tiny gangster.

‘Soon, Loafers. But first we need to pick up your brother.’

‘I don’t have a brother,’ protested Loafers.

‘Of course you do. The one with the keys to Uncle Pat’s house. He’s a regular little monkey.’

‘Oh,’ said Loafers. ‘That brother.’

Loafers and Carla took the limo out to the East Side. Loafers was still in awe of the sheer size of American buildings. In Kilkenny there was nothing over five storeys, and Loafers himself had lived all his life in a suburban bungalow. Not that he would ever admit that to his Mob friends. For their benefit he had reinvented himself as an orphan, who spent his youth in and out of various remand homes.

‘Who’s the monkey?’ he asked.

Carla Frazetti was fixing her jet-black hair in a compact mirror. It was short and slicked back.

‘A new guy. Mo Digence. He’s Irish, like you. It makes things very convenient. No visas, no papers, no elaborate cover story. Just two short guys home for the holidays.’

Loafers bristled.

‘What do you mean two short guys?’

Carla snapped the compact shut.

‘Who are you talking to, McGuire? Because you couldn’t be talking to me. Not in that tone.’

Loafers paled, his life flashing before him.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Frazetti. It’s just the short thing. I’ve been listening to it my whole life.’

‘What do you want people to call you? Lofty? You’re short, Loafers. Get over it. That’s what gives you your edge. My godfather always says there’s nothing more dangerous than a short guy with something to prove. That’s why you’ve got a job.’

‘I suppose.’

Carla patted him on the shoulder.

‘Cheer up, Loafers. Compared to this guy, you’re a regular giant.’

Loafers perked up considerably. ‘Really? Just how short is Mo Digence?’

‘He’s short,’ said Carla. ‘I don’t know the exact centimetres, but any shorter and I’d be changing his diaper and stuffing him in a stroller.’

Loafers grinned. He was going to enjoy this job.

THE MONKEY

Mo Digence had seen better days. Less than four months ago he had been living it up in a Los Angeles penthouse with over a million dollars in the bank. But now his funds had been frozen by the Criminal Assets Bureau and he was working for the Chicago Mob on a commission basis. Spatz Antonelli was not known for the generosity of his commissions. Of course, Mo could always leave Chicago and go back to LA, but there was a police task force there with his name on it, just waiting for him to return to the scene of the crime. In fact, there was no safe haven for Mo above ground or below it, because Mo Digence was actually Mulch Diggums, kleptomaniac dwarf and fugitive from the LEP.

Mulch was a tunnel dwarf, who decided that a life in the mines was not for him and put his mining talents to another use: namely, relieving Mud People of their valuables and selling them on the fairy black market. Of course, entering another’s dwelling without permission meant forfeiting your magic, but Mulch didn’t care. Dwarfs didn’t have much power anyway, and casting spells had always made him nauseous.

Dwarfs have several physical features that make them ideal burglars. They can dislocate their jaws, ingesting several kilos of soil a second. It is stripped of any beneficial minerals, then ejected at the other end. They have also developed the ability to drink through their pores, an attribute that can be very handy during cave-ins. It also transforms the pores into living suction cups, a convenient tool in any

burglar's arsenal. Finally, dwarf hair is actually a network of living antennae, similar to feline whiskers, which can do everything from trap beetles to bounce sonar waves off a tunnel wall.

Mulch had been a rising star in the fairy underworld – until Commander Julius Root got hold of his file. Since then, he had spent over three hundred years in and out of prison. He was currently on the run for stealing several gold bars from the Holly Short ransom fund. There was no safe haven below ground any more, even among his own kind. So Mulch was forced to pass himself off as human, and take whatever work he could get from the Chicago Mob.

There were hazards associated with impersonating a human. Of course, his size drew attention from everyone who happened to glance downwards. But Mulch quickly discovered that Mud People could find a reason to distrust almost anyone. Height, weight, skin colour, religion. It was almost safer to be different in some way.

The sun was a bigger problem. Dwarfs are extremely photosensitive, with a burn time of less than three minutes. Luckily, Mulch's job generally involved night work, but when he was forced to venture abroad in daylight hours the dwarf made certain that every centimetre of exposed skin was covered with long-lasting sun block.

Mulch had rented a basement apartment in an early twentieth-century brownstone. It was a bit of a fixer-upper, but this suited the dwarf just fine. He stripped out the floorboards in the bedroom, dumping two tons of topsoil and fertilizer on to the rotten foundations. Mould and damp already clung to the walls, so no need to remodel anything there. In a matter of hours, insect life was thriving in the room. Mulch would lie back in his pit and snag cockroaches with his beard hair. Home sweet home. Not only was the apartment beginning to resemble a tunnel cave, but if the LEP came a callin', he could be fifty metres below ground in the blink of an eye.

In the coming days, Mulch would come to regret not taking that route as soon as he heard the knock at the door.

There was a knock at the door. Mulch crawled out of his tunnel bed

and checked the video buzzer. Carla Frazetti was checking her hair in the brass knocker.

The boss's god-daughter? In person. This must be a big job. Perhaps the commission would be enough to set him up in another state. He'd been in Chicago for nearly three months now, and it was only a matter of time before the LEP picked up his trail. He would never leave the US though. If you had to live above ground, it might as well be somewhere with cable TV and a lot of rich people to steal from.

Mulch pressed the intercom panel.

'Just a minute, Miss Frazetti, I'm getting dressed.'

'Hurry it up, Mo,' snapped Carla, her voice crackly through the cheap speakers. 'I'm getting old here.'

Mulch threw on a robe he had fashioned from old potato sacks. He found the texture of the cloth, reminiscent of Haven Penitentiary pyjamas, to be weirdly comforting. He gave his beard a quick comb to dislodge any straggling beetles, and answered the door.

Carla Frazetti swept past him into the lounge, settling into the room's only armchair. There was another person on the doorstep, hidden beneath the camera's field. Mulch made a mental note. Redirect the CCTV lens. A fairy could sneak right in under it, even if he or she wasn't shielded.

The man gave Mulch a dangerous squint. Typical Mob behaviour. Just because these people were murdering gangsters, didn't mean they had to be rude.

'Don't you have another chair?' asked the small human, following Miss Frazetti into the lounge.

Mulch closed the door. 'I don't get many visitors. Actually, you're the first. Usually Bruno beeps me and I come into the chop shop.'

Bruno the Cheese was the Mob's local supervisor. He ran his business from a local hot-car warehouse. Legend had it that he hadn't been out from behind his desk during work hours in fifteen years.

'Quite a look you've got going here,' said Loafers sarcastically. 'Mould and woodlice. I like it.'

Mulch ran a fond finger along a green strip of damp. ‘That mould was just sitting behind the wallpaper when I moved in. Amazing what people cover up.’

Carla Frazetti took a bottle of White Petals perfume from her bag and sprayed the air around her person.

‘OK, enough conversation. I have a special job for you, Mo.’

Mulch forced himself to stay calm. This was his big chance. Maybe he could find a nice damp hell hole and settle down for a while.

‘Is this the kind of job where there’s a big pay-off if you do it right?’

‘No,’ replied Carla. ‘This is the kind of job where there’s a painful pay-off if you do it wrong.’

Mulch sighed. Didn’t anyone talk nicely any more?

‘So why me?’ he asked.

Carla Frazetti smiled, her ruby winking in the gloom.

‘I’m going to answer that question, Mo. Even though I’m not used to explaining myself to the hired help. Especially not a monkey like yourself.’

Mulch swallowed. Sometimes he forgot how ruthless these people were. Never for long.

‘You’ve been chosen for this assignment, Mo, because of the outstanding job you did with that Van Gogh.’

Mulch smiled modestly. The museum alarm had been child’s play. There hadn’t even been any dogs.

‘But also because you have an Irish passport.’

A gnome fugitive hiding out in NYC had run him up some Irish papers on a stolen LEP copier. The Irish had always been Mulch’s favourite humans, so he had decided to be one. He should have known it would lead to trouble.

‘This particular job is in Ireland, which might be a problem, generally. But for you two it’ll be like a paid holiday.’

Mulch nodded at Loafers. ‘Who’s the mutt?’

Loafers’ squint narrowed. Mulch knew that if Miss Frazetti gave the

word, the man would kill him on the spot.

‘The mutt is Loafers McGuire, your partner. He’s a metal man. It’s a two-tiered job. You open the doors. Loafers escorts the mark back here.’

Escorting the mark. Mulch understood what that term meant, and he didn’t want any part of it. Robbery was one thing, but kidnapping was another. Mulch knew that he couldn’t actually turn down this assignment. What he could do was ditch the metal man at the first opportunity and head to one of the southern states. Apparently Florida had some lovely swamps.

‘So, who’s the mark?’ said Mulch, pretending that it mattered.

‘That’s need-to-know information,’ said Loafers.

‘And let me guess, I don’t need to know.’

Carla Frazetti pulled a photograph from her coat pocket.

‘The less you know, the less you have to feel guilty about. This is all you need. The house. This photograph is all we have for the moment; you can case the joint when you get there.’

Mulch took the photo. What he saw on the paper hit him like a gas attack. It was Fowl Manor. Therefore Artemis was the target. This little psychopath was being sent to kidnap Artemis.

Frazetti sensed his discomfort. ‘Something wrong, Mo?’

Don’t let it show on your face, thought Mulch. Don’t let them see.

‘No. It’s... eh... That’s quite a set-up. I can see alarm boxes and outdoor spots. It’s not going to be easy.’

‘If it was easy, I’d do it myself,’ said Carla.

Loafers took a step forward, looking down at Mulch. What’s the matter, little man? Too tough for you?’

Mulch was forced to think on his feet. If Carla Frazetti thought he wasn’t up to the job, then they would send somebody else. Somebody with no qualms about leading the Mob to Artemis’s door. Mulch was surprised to realize that he couldn’t let that happen. The Irish boy had saved his life during the goblin rebellion, and was the closest thing he had to a friend – which was pretty pathetic when you thought about

it. He had to take the job, if only to make sure that it didn't go according to plan.

'Hey, don't worry about me. A building hasn't been built that Mo Digence can't crack. I just hope Loafers is man enough for the job.'

Loafers grabbed the dwarf by the lapels. 'What's that supposed to mean, Digence?'

Mulch generally avoided insulting people who were likely to kill him, but it might be useful to establish Loafers as a hothead now. Especially if he was going to blame him for things going wrong later.

'It's one thing being a midget monkey, but a midget metal man? How good can you be at close quarters?'

Loafers dropped the dwarf and ripped open his shirt to reveal a chest rippling with a tapestry of tattoos.

'That's how good I am, Digence. Count the tattoos. Count 'em.'

Mulch shot Miss Frazetti a loaded look. The look said: You're going to trust this guy?

'That's enough!' said Carla. 'The testosterone in here is starting to stink worse than the walls. This is a very important job. If you two can't handle it, I'll bring in another team.'

Loafers buttoned his shirt. 'OK, Miss Frazetti. We can handle it. This job is as good as done.'

Carla stood, brushing a couple of centipedes from the hem of her jacket. The insects didn't bother her unduly. She'd seen a lot worse in her twenty-five years.

'Glad to hear it. Mo, put some clothes on and grab your monkey kit. We'll wait in the limo.'

Loafers poked Mulch in the chest. 'Five minutes. Then we're coming in to get you.'

Mulch watched them go. This was his last chance to duck out. He could chew through the bedroom foundations and be on a southbound train before Carla Frazetti knew he was gone.

Mulch thought about it seriously. This kind of thing was totally against his nature. It wasn't that he was a bad fairy, it was simply that

he wasn't accustomed to helping other people. Not unless there was something in it for him. Deciding to help Artemis Fowl was a completely selfless act. Mulch shuddered. A conscience was the last thing he needed right now. Next thing you knew, he'd be selling cookies for the Girl Guides.

CHAPTER 6: ASSAULT ON FOWL MANOR

EXCERPT FROM ARTEMIS FOWL'S DIARY. DISK 2. ENCRYPTED



MY father had finally regained consciousness. I was, of course, relieved, but his last words to me that day were chasing themselves around in my mind.

'Gold isn't all-important, Arty,' he had said. 'Neither is power. We have everything we need right here. The three of us.'

Was it possible that the magic had transformed my father? I had to know. I needed to speak to him alone. So, at 3 a.m. the following morning, I had Butler bring me back to Helsinki's University Hospital in the rented Mercedes.

Father was still awake, reading War and Peace by lamplight.

'Not many laughs,' he commented. More jokes. I tried to smile, but my face just wasn't in the mood.

Father closed the book. 'I've been expecting you, Arty. We need to talk. There are a few things we have to straighten out.'

I stood stiffly at the foot of the bed. 'Yes, Father. I agree.'

Father's smile was tinged with sadness. 'So formal. I remember being the same with my own father. I sometimes think that he didn't know me at all, and I worry that the same thing will happen to us. So I want us to talk, son, not about bank accounts. Not stocks and shares. Not corporate takeovers. I don't want to talk business, I want to talk about you.'

I had been afraid of this. 'Me? You are the priority here, Father.'

'Perhaps, but I cannot be happy until your mother's mind is put at rest.'

'At rest?' I asked, as though I didn't know where this was going.

'Don't play the innocent, Artemis. I've called a few of my law-enforcement contacts around Europe. Apparently you have been active in my absence. Very active.'

I shrugged, unsure whether I was being scolded or praised.

'Not so long ago I would have been very impressed by your antics. Such audacity and still a minor. But now, speaking as a father, things have to change, Arty. You must reclaim your childhood. It is my wish, and your mother's, that you return to school after the holidays and leave the family's business to me.'

'But, Father!'

'Trust me, Arty. I've been in business a lot longer than you. I have promised your mother that the Fowls are on the straight and narrow from now on. All of the Fowls. I have another chance, and I will not waste it on greed. We are a family now. A proper one. From now on the Fowl name will be associated with honour and honesty. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' I said, clasping his hand.

But what of my meeting with Chicago's Jon Spiro? I decided to proceed as planned. One last adventure – then the Fowls could be a proper family. After all, Butler would accompany me. What could go wrong?

FOWL MANOR

Butler opened his eyes. He was home. Artemis was asleep in the armchair beside the bed. The boy looked a hundred years old. It wasn't surprising after all he'd been through. That life was over now though. All of it.

'Anybody home?' said the manservant.

Artemis was instantly alert.

'Butler, you've come back to us.'

Butler struggled on to his elbows. It was quite an effort.

'It's a surprise to me. I never expected to see you, or anyone, ever again.'

Artemis poured a glass of water from the bedside jug.

‘Here, old friend. Just rest.’

Butler drank slowly. He was tired, but it was more than that. He had felt battle fatigue before, but this went deeper.

‘Artemis, what has happened? I shouldn’t be alive at all. And if I accept that I am alive, then I should be experiencing massive amounts of pain right about now.’

Artemis crossed to the window, looking out over the estate.

‘Blunt shot you. It was a fatal wound, and Holly wasn’t around to help, so I froze you until she arrived.’

Butler shook his head. ‘Cryogenics? Only Artemis Fowl. You used the fish freezers, I suppose?’

Artemis nodded.

‘I trust I am not part freshwater trout now, eh?’

When Artemis turned to face his friend, he was not smiling.

‘There were complications.’

‘Complications?’

Artemis took a breath. ‘It was a difficult healing – no way to predict the outcome. Foaly warned that it might be too much for your system, but I insisted we press on.’

Butler sat up. ‘Artemis. It’s all right. I’m alive. Anything is better than the alternative.’

Artemis was not reassured. He took a pearl-handled mirror from the locker.

‘Prepare yourself, and take a look.’

Butler took a deep breath and looked. He stretched his jaw and pinched the bags beneath his eyes.

‘Just how long was I out?’ he asked.

TRANSATLANTIC BOEING 747

Mulch had decided that the best way to undermine the mission was to

antagonize Loafers until he went crazy. Driving people crazy was a talent of his, and one that he did not get to exercise often enough.

The two diminutive individuals were seated side by side in a 747, watching the clouds shoot past below. First class: one of the perks of working for the Antonellis.

Mulch sipped delicately from a champagne flute.

‘So, Slippers...’

‘That’s Loafers.’

‘Oh yes, Loafers. What’s the story behind all the tattoos?’

Loafers rolled up his sleeve, revealing a turquoise snake with drops of blood for eyes. Another of his own designs.

‘I get one done after every job.’

‘Oh,’ said Mulch. ‘So if you paint a kitchen, then you get a tattoo?’

‘Not that kind of job, stupid.’

‘What kind of job then?’

Loafers ground his teeth. ‘Do I have to spell it out for you?’

Mulch pinched some peanuts from a passing tray.

‘No point. I never got no schoolin’. Plain English will be fine.’

‘You can’t be this stupid! Spatz Antonelli doesn’t hire morons.’

Mulch gave a smarmy wink. ‘You sure about that?’

Loafers patted his shirt, hoping to find a weapon of some kind.

‘You wait until this is over, smart Alec. Me and you will settle our differences.’

‘You keep telling yourself that, Boots.’

‘Loafers!’

‘Whatever.’

Mulch hid behind the airline magazine. This was too easy. The mobster was half-crazed already. A few more hours in Mulch’s company should be enough to have Loafers McGuire foaming at the mouth.

DUBLIN AIRPORT, IRELAND

Mulch and Loafers passed through Irish customs without incident. After all, they were simply citizens returning home for the holidays. It wasn't as if they were a Mob team up to no good. How could they be? Whoever heard of little people being involved in organized crime? Nobody. But maybe that was because they were very good at it.

Passport control provided Mulch with another opportunity to infuriate his partner.

The officer was doing his best not to notice Mulch's height, or lack of it.

'So, Mister Digence, home to visit the family?'

Mulch nodded. 'That's right. My mother's folks are from Killarney.'

'Oh, really?'

'O'Reilly, actually. But what's a vowel between friends?'

'Very good. You should be on the stage.'

'It's funny you should mention that –'

The passport officer groaned. Ten more minutes and his shift would have been over.

'I was being sarcastic actually...' he muttered.

'– because my friend Mister McGuire and I are also doing a stint in the Christmas pantomime. It's *Snow White*. I'm Doc, and he's Dopey.'

The passport officer forced a smile. 'Very good. Next.'

Mulch spoke for the entire queue to hear.

'Of course, Mister McGuire there was born to play Dopey, if you catch my drift.'

Loafers lost it right there in the terminal.

'You little freak!' he screamed. 'I'll kill you! You'll be my next tattoo. You'll be my next tattoo!'

Mulch tutted as Loafers disappeared beneath half a dozen security guards.

'Actors,' he said. 'Highly strung.'

They released Loafers three hours later after a full search and several phone calls to the parish priest in his home town. Mulch was waiting in the pre-ordered rental car, a specially modified model with elevated accelerator and brake pedals.

‘Your temper is seriously jeopardizing this operation,’ commented the dwarf, straight-faced. ‘I’ll have to phone Miss Frazetti if you can’t control yourself.’

‘Drive,’ said the metal man hoarsely. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

‘OK then. But you’re on your very last chance. One more episode like that and I’m going to have to crush your head between my teeth.’

Loafers noticed his partner’s teeth for the first time. They were tombstone-shaped blocks of enamel, and there seemed to be an awful lot of them for just one mouth. Was it possible that Digence could actually do what he threatened? No, Loafers decided. He was just a bit spooked after the customs interrogation. Still, there was something about the dwarf’s smile. A glint that spoke of hidden and frightening talents. Talents that the metal man would prefer to stay hidden.

Mulch took care of the driving while Loafers made a couple of calls on his mobile phone. It was a simple matter for him to contact a few old associates and arrange for a weapon, a silencer and two headsets to be left in a duffel bag behind the motorway exit sign for Fowl Manor. Loafers’ associates even took credit cards, so there was no need for the usual macho trade-off that generally accompanied black-market transactions.

Loafers checked the weapon’s action and sights in the car. He felt in control again.

‘So, Mo,’ said Loafers, chuckling as if that simple rhyme was the funniest joke he had ever made. And sadly, it was. ‘Have you put together a plan yet?’

Mulch didn’t take his eyes from the road. ‘Nope. I thought you were the head honcho here. Plans are your department. I just break and enter.’

‘That’s right. I am the head honcho, and believe me Master Fowl is

going to realize that too when I'm finished talking to him.'

'Master Fowl?' said Mulch innocently. 'We're here for some kid?'

'Not just some kid,' revealed Loafers, against orders. 'Artemis Fowl. Heir to the Fowl criminal empire. He has something in his head that Miss Frazetti wants. So we're supposed to impress upon the little brat how important it is that he come with us and spill the beans.'

Mulch's grip tightened on the wheel. He should have made his move before now. But the trick was not to incapacitate Loafers, it was persuading Carla Frazetti not to send another team.

Artemis would know what to do. He had to get to the boy before Loafers did. A mobile phone and a visit to the bathroom were all he needed. A pity he had never bothered purchasing a phone, but there had never been anybody to call before. Besides, you could never be too careful with Foaly. That centaur could triangulate a chirping cricket.

'We better stop for supplies,' said Loafers. 'It could take days to check this place out.'

'No need. I know the layout. I burgled it before, in my youth. Piece of cake.'

'And you didn't mention this before because...'

Mulch made a rude gesture at a lorry driver hogging both lanes.

'You know the way it is. I work on commission. The commission is calculated on a hardship basis. The second I say I turned this place over before, ten grand is cut off my fee.'

Loafers didn't argue. It was true. You always exaggerated the difficulty of the job. Anything to squeeze a few more bucks out of your employer.

'So, you can get us in there?'

'I can get *me* in there. Then I come back out for you.'

Loafers was suspicious. 'Why don't I just come with you? It would be a lot easier than hanging around in broad daylight.'

'Firstly, I'm not going in until after dark. And secondly, sure you can come with me, if you don't mind crawling through the septic tank

and up nine metres of effluent pipe.’

Loafers had to open a window at the thought of it.

‘OK. You come get me. But we stay in contact over the headsets. Anything goes wrong and you let me know.’

‘Yes, sir, boss,’ said Mulch, screwing the earpiece into a hairy ear and clipping the mike to his jacket. ‘Wouldn’t want you to miss your appointment intimidating a kid.’

The sarcasm made a slight whistling noise as it flew over Loafer’s head.

‘That’s right,’ said the Kilkenny man. ‘I *am* the boss. And you *don’t* want to make me late for my appointment.’

Mulch had to concentrate to stop his beard hair curling. Dwarf hair is very mood-sensitive, especially to hostility, and it was flowing out of this man’s every pore. Mulch’s bristles had never been wrong yet. This little partnership was not going to end well.

Mulch parked in the shadow of the Fowl Estate’s boundary wall.

‘You certain this is the place?’ asked Loafers.

Mulch pointed a stubby finger at the ornate iron gate.

‘You see there where it says Fowl Manor?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d say this was probably the place.’

Even Loafers couldn’t miss a direct jibe like that.

‘You better get me in there, Digence, or...’

Mulch showed him the teeth. ‘Or what?’

‘Or Miss Frazetti will be extremely annoyed,’ completed Loafers lamely, well aware that he was losing the hard-man-banter battle. Loafers resolved to teach Mo Digence a lesson as soon as possible.

‘We wouldn’t want to annoy Miss Frazetti,’ said Mulch. He climbed down from the elevated seat and reclaimed his gear bag from the trunk. There were certain unorthodox burglary tools in the bag, supplied by his fairy contact in New York. Hopefully none of them

would be needed. Not the way he intended gaining entrance to the manor.

Mulch rapped on the passenger window. Loafers buzzed it open.

‘What?’

‘Remember, you stay here until I come and get you.’

‘That sounds like an order, Digence. Are you giving me orders now?’

‘Me?’ said Mulch, revealing the full expanse of his teeth. ‘Giving orders? I wouldn’t dream of it.’

Loafers buzzed the window back up.

‘You better not be,’ he said as soon as there was a layer of toughened glass between him and those teeth.

Inside Fowl Manor, Butler had just finished clipping and shaving. He was beginning to look like his old self again. His older self.

‘Kevlar, you say?’ he repeated, examining the darkened tissue on his chest.

Artemis nodded. ‘Apparently some fibres were trapped in the wound. The magic replicated them. According to Foaly, the new tissue will restrict your breathing, but it isn’t dense enough to be bulletproof, except for a small-calibre bullet.’

Butler buttoned his shirt. ‘Everything is different, Artemis. I can’t guard you any more.’

‘I won’t need guarding. Holly was right. My grand schemes generally lead to people getting hurt. As soon as we have dealt with Spiro I intend to concentrate on my education.’

‘As soon as we have dealt with Spiro? You make it sound like a foregone conclusion. Jon Spiro is a dangerous man, Artemis. I thought you would have learned that.’

‘I have, old friend. Believe me, I won’t underestimate him again. I have already begun to formulate a plan. We should be able to retrieve the C Cube and neutralize Mister Spiro, providing Holly agrees to help.’

‘Where is Holly? I need to thank her. Again.’

Artemis glanced out of the window. ‘She has gone to complete the Ritual. You can guess where.’

Butler nodded. They had first encountered Holly at a sacred fairy site in the south-east while she was conducting the power-restoring Ritual. Although ‘encountered’ was not the term Holly used. ‘Abducted’ was closer to the truth.

‘She should be back within the hour. I suggest you rest until then.’

Butler shook his head. ‘I can rest later. Right now, I have to check the grounds. It’s unlikely that Spiro could put a team together so quickly. But you never know.’

The bodyguard crossed to a wall panel that linked his room to the security-system control booth. Artemis could see that each step was an effort. With Butler’s new chest tissue, just climbing the stairs would seem like a marathon.

Butler split-screened his monitor so he could view all the CCTVs simultaneously. One of the screens interested him more than the others, so he punched it up on the monitor.

‘Well, well,’ he chuckled. ‘Look who’s dropped in to say hello.’

Artemis crossed to the security panel. There was a very small individual making rude gestures at the kitchen-door camera.

‘Mulch Diggums,’ said Artemis. ‘Just the dwarf I wanted to see.’

Butler transferred Mulch’s image to the main screen.

‘Perhaps. But why does he want to see you?’

Melodramatic as always, the dwarf insisted on a sandwich before explaining the situation. Unfortunately for Mulch, it was Artemis who volunteered to prepare it for him. He emerged from the pantry with what resembled nothing more than an explosion on a plate.

‘It’s more difficult than it looks,’ explained the boy.

Mulch cranked open his massive jaws, pouring the whole pile down in one swallow. After several minutes’ chewing, he reached an entire hand into his mouth and dislodged a chunk of roast turkey.

‘Next time more mustard,’ he said, brushing some crumbs from his shirt and, in the process, inadvertently switching on the mike clipped there.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Artemis.

‘You should be thanking me, Mud Boy,’ said Mulch. ‘I came all the way from Chicago to save your life. Surely that’s worth one lousy sandwich? And when I say sandwich I mean it in the loosest sense of the word.’

‘Chicago? Jon Spiro sent you?’

The dwarf shook his head. ‘Possibly, but not directly. I work for the Antonelli family. Of course, they have no idea that I am an actual fairy dwarf; they think I’m simply the best cat burglar in the business.’

‘Chicago’s district attorney has linked the Antonellis to Spiro in the past. Or rather, he’s tried to.’

‘Whatever. Anyway, the plan is that I break in here, and then my partner encourages you to accompany us to Chicago.’

Butler was leaning against the table. ‘Where is your partner now, Mulch?’

‘Outside the gate. He’s the small angry one. Glad to see you’re alive by the way, big man. There was a rumour going around the underworld that you were dead.’

‘I was,’ said Butler, heading for the security booth. ‘But I’m better now.’

Loafers took a small spiral pad from his breast pocket. In it he had recorded any quips that he felt had really worked in dangerous situations. Snappy dialogue, that was the trademark of a good gangster – according to the movies at any rate. He flicked through the pages, smiling fondly.

‘It’s time to close your account. Permanently.’ – Larry Ferrigamo. Bent banker. 9th August.

‘I’m afraid your hard drive has just been wiped.’ – David Spinski.

Computer hacker. 23rd September.

'I'm doing this 'cause I knead the dough.' – Morty the Baker. 17th July.

It was good material. Maybe he would write his memoirs some day.

Loafers was still chuckling when he heard Mo talking in his earpiece. At first he thought the monkey was speaking to him, but then he realized that his so-called partner was spilling the beans to their pigeon.

'You should be thanking me, Mud Boy,' said Digence. 'I came all the way from Chicago to save your life.'

To save his life! Mo was working for the other side and the little idiot had forgotten about his mike.

Loafers climbed out of the car, being careful to lock it. He would lose the deposit if the rental was stolen, and Miss Frazetti would take it out of his commission. There was a small pedestrian entrance in the wall beside the main gate. Mo Digence had left it open. Loafers slipped through and hurried down the avenue, careful to stay in the shadow of the trees.

In his ear, Mo kept rabbiting on. He laid out their entire plan to the Fowl kid without so much as the threat of torture. It was completely voluntary. Digence had somehow been working for the Irish kid all along. And what's more, Mo was not Mo, he was Mulch. What kind of a name was that? Mulch, who was apparently a fairy dwarf. This was getting weirder and weirder. Maybe the fairy dwarfs were some kind of gang. Although it wasn't much of a gang name. The *fairy dwarfs* were hardly going to strike terror into the hearts of the competition.

Loafers trotted up the avenue, past a line of elegant silver birches and an honest-to-God croquet pitch. Two peacocks strutted around the edge of a water feature. Loafers snorted. Water feature! In the days before TV gardeners it would have been called a pond.

Loafers was wondering where the delivery entrance was when he saw the sign: 'Deliveries at rear'. Thank you very much. He checked his silencer and load one more time, and tiptoed across the gravel driveway.

Artemis sniffed the air. 'What's that smell?'

Mulch poked his head round the refrigerator door.

'Me, I'm afraid,' he mumbled, an unfeasible amount of food revolving inside his mouth. 'Sunblock. Disgusting, I know, but I'd smell a whole lot worse without it. Think bacon strips on a flat rock in Death Valley.'

'A charming image.'

'Dwarfs are subterranean creatures,' explained Mulch. 'Even during the Frond Dynasty we lived underground...'

Frond was the first elfin king. During his reign, fairies and humans had shared the earth's surface.

'... Being photosensitive makes it difficult to exist among humans. To be honest, I'm a bit fed up of this life.'

'Your wish is my command,' said a voice. It was Loafers. He was standing at the kitchen door, brandishing a very large gun.

In fairness to Mulch, he recovered well.

'I thought I told you to wait outside.'

'It's true, you did. But I decided to come in anyway. And guess what? No septic tank, no effluent pipe. The back door is wide open.'

Mulch tended to grind his teeth when he thought. It sounded like nails being scraped down a chalkboard.

'Ah... yes. A stroke of luck there. I took advantage of it, but unfortunately I was interrupted by the boy. I had just gained his confidence when you burst in.'

'Don't bother,' said Loafers. 'Your mike is on. I heard the whole thing, Mo. Or should I say Mulch, the fairy dwarf?'

Mulch swallowed the half-chewed mass of food. Once again his big mouth had got him into trouble – maybe it could get him out of trouble too. It was just possible that he could unhinge his jaw and swallow the little hit man. He'd eaten bigger. A quick burst of dwarf gas should be enough to propel him across the room. He'd just have to hope that the gun didn't go off before he could pass it.

Loafers caught the look in Mulch's eye.

‘That’s right, little man,’ he said, cocking his pistol. ‘You go for it. See how far you get.’

Artemis was thinking too. He knew that he was safe for the moment. The newcomer would not harm him against orders. But Mulch’s time was running out and there was no one to save him. Butler was too weak to intervene even if he had been here. Holly was away completing the Ritual. And Artemis himself was not the best in physical situations. He would have to negotiate.

‘I know what you’re here for,’ he began. ‘The Cube’s secrets. I’ll tell you, but not if you harm my friend.’

Loafers waved the gun barrel. ‘You’ll do whatever I ask, when I ask. Possibly you’ll cry like a girl too. Sometimes that happens.’

‘Very well. I’ll tell you what you want to know. Just don’t shoot anyone.’

Loafers swallowed a grin. ‘Sure. That’s fine. You just come with me, nice and quiet, and I won’t hurt a soul. You have my word.’

Butler entered the kitchen. His face was slick with perspiration and his breath came in short gasps.

‘I checked the monitor,’ he said. ‘The car is empty, the other man must be...’

‘Here,’ completed Loafers. ‘Old news to everyone except you, Grandad. Now, no sudden moves and you might not have a heart attack.’

Artemis saw Butler’s eyes flitting around the room. He was searching for an angle. Some way to save them. Maybe yesterday’s Butler could have done it, but today’s Butler was fifteen years older and not yet fully recovered from magical surgery. The situation was desperate.

‘You could tie the others up,’ ventured Artemis. Then we could leave together.’

Loafers smacked his own head. ‘What a great idea! Then maybe I could agree to some other delaying tactic, on account of me being a complete amateur.’

Loafers felt a shadow fall across his back. He spun round to see a girl standing in the doorway. Another witness. Carla Frazetti would be getting the bill for all these sundries. This whole job had been misrepresented from the start.

‘OK, miss,’ said Loafers. ‘Go join the others. And don’t do anything stupid.’

The girl at the door flicked her hair over one shoulder, blinking her glittering green eyelids.

‘I don’t do stupid things,’ she said. Then her hand flicked out, brushing against Loafer’s weapon. She grabbed the pistol’s slide and deftly twisted it from the stock. The gun was now completely useless, except for hammering nails.

Loafers jerked backwards. ‘Hey, hey. Watch it. I don’t want to wound you by accident. This gun could go off.’

That’s what he thought.

Loafers continued brandishing his piece of harmless metal.

‘Back off, little girl. I won’t say it again.’

Juliet dangled the slide under his nose. ‘Or what? You’ll shoot me with this?’

Loafers stared cross-eyed at the piece of metal.

‘Hey, that looks just like...’

Then Juliet hit him in the chest so hard he crashed through the breakfast bar.

Mulch stared over at the unconscious mobster, then at the girl in the doorway.

‘Hey, Butler. Just a shot in the dark here, but I’d say that’s your sister.’

‘You’re right,’ said the manservant, hugging Juliet tightly. ‘How on earth did you guess?’

CHAPTER 7: BEST-LAID PLANS

FOWL MANOR



IT was time for consultation. That night, the group sat in the manor's conference room, facing two monitors that Juliet had brought down from the security booth. Foaly had hijacked the monitors' frequency and was broadcasting live images of Commander Root and himself.

Much to his own annoyance, Mulch was still present. He had been attempting to weasel some kind of reward from Artemis when Holly returned and cuffed him to a chair.

Root's cigar smoke was hazing the screen. 'Looks like the gang's all here,' he said, using the fairy gift of tongues to speak English. 'And guess what. I don't like gangs.'

Holly had placed her headset in the centre of the conference table, so all the room's occupants could be picked up.

'I can explain, Commander.'

'Oh, I'll just bet you can. But, strangely, I have a premonition that your explanation is going to cut no ice with me whatsoever, and I will have your badge in my drawer by the end of this shift.'

Artemis tried to intervene. 'Really, Commander. Holly – Captain Short – is only here because I tricked her.'

'Is that a fact? And then, pray tell, why is she still there? Doing lunch, are we?'

'This is no time for sarcasm, Commander. We have a serious

situation here. Potentially disastrous.’

Root exhaled a cloud of greenish smoke. ‘What you humans do to each other is your own affair. We are not your personal police force, Fowl.’

Foaly cleared his throat. ‘We’re involved whether we like it or not: Artemis was the one who pinged us. And that’s not the worst of it, Julius.’

Root glanced across at the centaur. Foaly had called him by his first name. Things must be serious.

‘Very well, Captain,’ he said. ‘Continue with your briefing.’

Holly opened a report on her hand-held computer.

‘Yesterday I responded to a recording from the Sentinel warning system. The call was sent by Artemis Fowl, a Mud Man well known to the LEP for his part in the B’wa Kell uprising. Fowl’s associate Butler had been mortally injured on the orders of another Mud Man, Jon Spiro, and he requested my assistance with a healing.’

‘Which you refused, and then requested technical back-up to perform a mind wipe, as per regulations.’

Holly could have sworn the screen was heating up.

‘No. Taking into account Butler’s considerable assistance during the goblin revolution, I performed the healing and transported Butler and Fowl back to their domicile.’

‘Tell me you didn’t fly them...?’

‘There was no alternative. They were wrapped in cam foil.’

Root rubbed his temples. ‘One foot. If there was so much as one foot sticking out, we could be all over the Internet by tomorrow. Holly, why do you do this to me?’

Holly didn’t reply. What could she say?

‘There’s more. We have detained one of Spiro’s employees. A nasty piece of work.’

‘Did he see you?’

‘No. But he heard Mulch say that he was a fairy dwarf.’

‘No problem,’ said Foaly. ‘Do a block mind wipe and send him home.’

‘It’s not that simple. The man is an assassin. He could be sent back to finish the job. I think we need to relocate him. Believe me. He won’t be missed here.’

‘OK,’ said Foaly. ‘Sedate him, do the wipe and get rid of anything that might trigger his memories. Then send him somewhere he can’t do any harm.’

The commander took several long puffs to calm himself.

‘OK. Tell me about the probe. And if Fowl is responsible, is the alert over?’

‘No. The human businessman Jon Spiro stole the fairy technology from Artemis.’

‘Which Artemis stole from us,’ noted Foaly.

‘This Spiro character is determined to acquire the technology’s secret and he’s not particular how he gets it,’ continued Holly.

‘And who knows the secret?’ asked Root.

‘Artemis is the only one who can operate the C Cube.’

‘Do I want to know what a C Cube is?’

Foaly took up the narrative. ‘Artemis cobbled together a microcomputer from old LEP technology. Most of it is obsolete below ground but, by human standards, it’s approximately fifty years ahead of their developmental schedule.’

‘And therefore worth a fortune,’ concluded the commander.

‘And therefore worth an absolute fortune,’ agreed Foaly.

Suddenly Mulch was listening. ‘A fortune? Exactly how much of a fortune?’

Root was relieved to have someone to shout at. ‘Shut your mouth, convict! This doesn’t concern you. You just concentrate on enjoying your last few breaths of free air. This time tomorrow you’ll be shaking hands with your cell mate, and I hope he’s a troll.’

Mulch was unbowed. ‘Give me a break, Julius. Every time there’s a

Fowl situation I'm the one who saves your sorry hide. I have no doubt that whatever plan Artemis concocts will feature yours truly. Probably in some ridiculously dangerous capacity.'

Root's complexion went from rosé to full-bodied red. 'Well, Artemis? Do you plan on using the convict?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether or not you give me Holly.'

Root's head disappeared behind a fog of cigar smoke. With the red tip glowing, he looked like a steam train coming out of a tunnel. Some of the smoke drifted across to Foaly's screen.

'It doesn't look good,' commented the centaur.

Eventually Root calmed down sufficiently to talk.

'Give you Holly? Gods, give me patience. Have you any idea the amount of red tape I'm ignoring just for this conference?'

'Quite a lot, I'd imagine.'

'A mountain of the stuff, Artemis. A mountain. I wouldn't be talking to you at all if it weren't for the B'wa Kell thing. If this ever leaked out, I'd end up directing sewage-treatment subs in Atlantis.'

Mulch winked at the screen. 'I probably shouldn't have heard that.'

The commander ignored him. 'You have thirty seconds, Artemis. Sell it to me.'

Artemis rose, standing directly before the screen.

'Spiro has fairy technology. It is unlikely that he will be able to use it, but it will put his scientists on to ion technology. The man is a megalomaniac, with no respect for life or the environment. Who knows what ghastly machine he will construct from fairy technology? There is also the definite chance that his new technology will lead him to discover Haven itself and, if that happens, the life of every creature on the planet, and under it, is at risk.'

Root wheeled his chair off-camera, reappearing in Foaly's monitor. He leaned close to the centaur's ear, whispering in low tones.

‘It doesn’t look good,’ said Holly. ‘I could be on the next shuttle home.’

Artemis drummed his fingers on the table. It was difficult to see how he could take on Spiro without fairy assistance.

After several moments, the commander reappeared in his own screen.

‘This is serious. We cannot afford to risk that this Spiro person will activate another probe. However small the possibility, there’s still a chance. I will have to put together an insertion team. The works: a fully tooled-up Retrieval team.’

‘A full team?’ protested Holly. ‘In an urban area? Commander, you know what Retrieval is like. This could turn into a disaster. Let me take a crack at it.’

Root considered it. ‘It will take forty-eight hours to clear an operation, so that’s what you have. I can cover for you for a couple of days. I can’t let you have Foaly. He’ll have enough to do putting this operation together. But Diggums can help if he wants; it’s his choice. I might drop a couple of the burglary charges, but he’s still facing five to ten for the bullion robbery. That’s all I can do. If you fail, then the Retrieval team is waiting in the wings.’

Artemis thought about it. ‘Very well.’

Root took a breath. ‘There is a condition.’

‘I thought as much,’ said Artemis. ‘You want a mind wipe. Correct?’

‘That’s right, Artemis. You are becoming a severe liability to the People. If we are to assist you in this matter, then you and your staff would have to submit to mind wipes.’

‘And if we don’t?’

‘Then we go straight to plan B, and you get wiped anyway.’

‘No offence, Commander, but this is a technical matter...’

Foaly stepped in. ‘There are two kinds of mind wipe. A block wipe, which takes out everything in the chosen period. Holly could do that with the equipment in her bag. And a fine-tune wipe, which only deletes certain memories. This is a more specialized procedure, but

there is less danger of a drop in IQ. We do a fine-tune wipe on all of you. I detonate a data charge in your computer system that automatically deletes any fairy-related files. Also, I will need your permission to do a sweep of your house just in case there is any fairy memorabilia lying around. In practical terms, you will wake up the day after this operation with absolutely no record or memory of the fairy People.'

'You're talking about nearly two years of memories.'

'You won't miss them. Your brain will invent some new ones to fill the gaps.'

It was a tough decision. On the one hand, his knowledge of the People was now a large part of Artemis's psychological make-up. On the other, he could no longer put people's lives at risk.

'Very well,' said the teenager. 'I accept your offer.'

Root tossed the cigar into a nearby incinerator. 'OK then. We have a deal. Captain Short, keep a channel open at all times.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Holly.'

'Commander?'

'Be careful on this one. Your career won't survive another blow.'

'Understood, sir,' said Holly.

'Oh, and, convict?'

Mulch sighed. 'You mean me, I suppose, Julius?'

Root scowled. 'It's over, Mulch. You won't escape again, so get your brain ready for cold food and hard walls.'

Mulch stood, presenting his back to the screen. Somehow the bum-flap on his specially adapted tunnelling trousers flopped open, presenting the commander with a lovely view of his rear end. In the dwarf world, presenting your behind was the ultimate insult, as it is in most cultures.

Commander Root terminated the link. After all, there was no come-back from an affront like that.

WEST OF WAJIR, KENYA, EAST AFRICA

Loafers McGuire woke up with a debilitating headache. It was so painful that he felt obliged to come up with some imagery, in case he had to describe it later. His head felt, he decided, like there was an angry porcupine crawling around inside his cranium. Not bad, he thought. I should put that in the book.

Then he thought, what's a book? His next thought was, who am I? Shoes, something to do with shoes.

It is always this way when memory-implant subjects first regain consciousness. The old identity hangs around for a few moments, trying to assert itself, until outside stimuli wash it away.

Loafers sat up and the porcupine went crazy, jamming needles into every square inch of his soft brain tissue.

'Oh,' groaned Loafers, cradling his aching skull. What did all this mean? Where was he? And how did he get here?

Loafers looked at his arms. For a second, his brain projected tattoos on to the skin, but the images quickly disappeared. His skin was unblemished. Sunlight rolled across his forearms like white lightning.

All around him was scrubland. Terracotta earth stretched away to indigo hills in the distance. A golden disc of sun blasted cracks in the shimmering earth. Two figures ran through the heatwaves, elegant as cheetahs.

The men were giants, easily seven feet tall. Each carried an oval hide shield, a thin spear and a mobile phone. Their hair, necks and ears were adorned with multicoloured beads.

Loafers jumped to his feet. Feet which, he noticed, were clad in leather sandals. The men were wearing Nikes.

'Help,' he cried. 'Help me!'

The men altered their course, jogging across to the confused mobster.

'*Jambo*, brother. Are you lost?' asked one.

'I'm sorry,' said Loafers, in perfect Swahili. 'I don't speak Swahili.'

The man glanced at his partner.

'I see. And what is your name?'

'Loafers,' said Loafers' brain. 'Nuru,' said his mouth.

'Well, Nuru. *Unatoka wapi?* Where are you from?'

The words were out before Loafers could do anything about it.

'I don't know where I'm from, but I want to go with you. To your village. That's where I should be.'

The Kenyan warriors stared down at the little stranger. He was the wrong colour, true, but he seemed sane enough.

The taller of the two unhooked a mobile phone from his leopard-skin belt. He punched in the village chieftain's number.

'*Jambo*, Chief, this is Bobby. The earth spirits have left us another one.'

Bobby laughed, looking Loafers up and down.

'Yes, he's tiny, but he looks strong and he's got a smile bigger than a peeled banana.'

Loafers stretched his smile, just in case it was a factor. For some reason, all he wanted in this world was to go to the village and live a productive life.

'OK, Chief, I'll bring him in. He can have the missionary's old hut.'

Bobby clipped the phone back on to his belt.

'Very well, brother Nuru. You're in. Follow us, and try to keep up.'

The warriors set off at a brisk run. Loafers, henceforth to be known as Nuru, raced after them, his leather sandals flapping beneath his feet. He really would have to see about getting a pair of trainers.

One hundred and fifty feet over their heads, Captain Holly Short hovered, shielded from view, recording the entire incident.

'Relocation complete,' she said into her helmet mike. 'The subject has been adopted successfully. No apparent signs of original personality. But he will be monitored at monthly intervals, just in case.'

Foaly was on the other end of the line.

‘Excellent, Captain. Return to shuttle port E77 immediately. If you open the throttle, you might just make the evening shuttle. We’ll have you back in Ireland in a couple of hours.’

Holly did not need to be told twice. It wasn’t often you got clearance for a speed run. She activated her radar in case of buzzards and set the stopwatch on her visor.

‘Now,’ she said. ‘Let’s see if we can’t break the airspeed record.’

A record that Julius Root had set eighty years ago.

PART 2: COUNTERATTACK

CHAPTER 8: HOOKS, LINES AND SINKERS

EXCERPT FROM ARTEMIS FOWL'S DIARY. DISK 2. ENCRYPTED.



TODAY Father was fitted for his prosthetic limb. He joked throughout the entire process, as though he were being measured for a new suit on Grafton Street. I must admit, his good humour was infectious, and I found myself making excuses just to sit in the corner of the hospital room and enjoy his presence.

It wasn't always this way. In the past, one needed valid grounds to visit my father. Of course, he wasn't generally available, and even when he was, his time was limited. One did not burst into the Fowl study without good reason. But now I feel welcome at his side. It is a nice feeling.

My father always liked to impart wisdom, but now it is more philosophical than financial. In the old days, he would direct my attention to the latest share prices in the Financial Times.

'Look, Artemis,' he would say. 'Everything else falls, but gold stays steady. That is because there is not enough of it. And there never will be. Buy gold, boy, and keep it safe.'

I liked to listen to his pearls of wisdom, but now they are harder to understand.

On the third day of his consciousness, I fell asleep on the hospital bed while my father did his walking exercises. I woke to find him looking at me thoughtfully.

'Shall I tell you something, Arty?' he said.

I nodded, unsure what to expect.

‘While I was a prisoner I thought about my life, how I had wasted it gathering riches whatever the cost to my family and others around me. In a man’s life, he gets few chances to make a difference. To do the right thing. To be a hero, if you will. I intend to become involved in that struggle.’

This was not the kind of wisdom I was accustomed to hearing from my father. Was this his natural personality or the fairy magic? Or a combination of both?

‘I never got involved before. I always thought the world could not be changed.’

Father’s gaze was intense, burning with new passion.

‘But things are different now. My priorities are different. I intend to seize the day, be the hero that every father should be.’

He sat on the bed beside me.

‘And what about you, Arty? Will you make the journey with me? When the moment comes will you take your chance to be a hero?’

I couldn’t respond. I didn’t know the answer. I still don’t.

FOWL MANOR

For two hours Artemis locked himself in his study, sitting cross-legged in the meditative position taught to him by Butler. Occasionally he would voice an idea aloud, to be picked up by a voice-activated digital recorder placed on the mat before him. Butler and Juliet knew better than to interrupt the planning process. This period was crucial to the success of their mission. Artemis had the ability to visualize a hypothetical situation and calculate the likely outcomes. It was almost a dream state, and any disturbance could send the thread of his ideas flying like vapours.

Eventually Artemis emerged, tired but satisfied. He held three CD-writable disks.

‘I want you to study these files,’ he said. ‘They contain details of your assignment. When you have memorized the contents destroy the disks.’

Holly took the disks.

‘A CD. How quaint. We have these in museums.’

‘There are several computers in the study,’ continued Artemis. ‘Use any terminal you wish.’

Butler was empty-handed.

‘Nothing for me, Artemis?’ he asked.

Artemis waited until the others had gone.

‘I needed to give you your instructions verbally,’ he began. ‘I don’t want to risk Foaly picking them up from the computer.’

Butler sighed deeply, sinking into a leather armchair by the fireplace.

‘I’m not going with you. Am I?’

Artemis sat on the chair’s arm. ‘No, old friend. But I have an important task for you.’

‘Really, Artemis,’ said Butler. ‘I’ve skipped right over my midlife crisis. You don’t have to invent a job just to make me feel useful.’

‘No, Butler. This is of vital importance. It concerns the mind wipes. If my plan succeeds, we will have to submit to them. I see no way to sabotage the process itself, so I must ensure that something survives Foaly’s search. Something that will trigger our memories of the People. Foaly once told me that a strong enough stimulus can result in total recall.’

Butler shifted his position in the chair, wincing. His chest was still giving him trouble. Not surprising really. He had been alive less than two days.

‘Any ideas?’

‘We need to lay a couple of false trails. Foaly will be expecting that.’

‘Of course. A hidden file on the server. I could send an e-mail to ourselves, but not pick it up. Then the first time we check our mail, all this information will come through.’

Artemis handed the bodyguard a folded sheet of A4.

‘No doubt we will be mesmerized and questioned. In the past we have hidden from the *mesmer* behind mirrored sunglasses. We won’t get away with that on this occasion. So, we need to come up with something else. Here are the instructions.’

Butler studied the plans.

‘It’s possible. I know someone in Limerick. The best man in the country for this kind of specialized work.’

‘Excellent,’ said Artemis. ‘After that, you need to put everything we have on the People on a disk. All documents, videos, schematics. Everything. And don’t forget my diary. The whole story is there.’

‘And where do we hide this disk?’ asked Butler.

Artemis untied the fairy pendant from around his neck.

‘I’d say this was about the same size as the disk. Wouldn’t you?’

Butler tucked the gold medallion into his jacket pocket.

‘It soon will be,’ he said.

Butler prepared them a meal. Nothing fancy. Vegetarian spring rolls, followed by mushroom risotto with crème caramel to finish. Mulch opted for a bucket of diced worms and beetles, sautéed in a rainwater and moss vinaigrette.

‘Has everybody studied their files?’ Artemis asked, when the group had adjourned to the library.

‘Yes,’ said Holly. ‘But I seem to be missing a few key pieces.’

‘Nobody has the entire plan. Just the parts concerning them. I think it’s safer that way. Do we have the equipment I specified?’

Holly dumped the contents of her pack on the rug.

‘A complete LEP surveillance kit, including camouflage foil, mikes, video clips and a first aid box.’

‘Plus we still have two intact LEP helmets and three laser handguns left over from the siege,’ added Butler. ‘And, of course, one of the prototype Cubes from the lab.’

Artemis passed the cordless phone to Mulch.

‘Very well then. We may as well get started.’

THE SPIRO NEEDLE

Jon Spiro sat in his opulent office, staring glumly at the C Cube on his desk. People thought it was easy being him. How little they knew. The more money you had, the more pressure you were under. He had eight hundred employees in this building alone, all relying on him for a pay cheque. They wanted yearly salary reviews, medical plans, baby-care centres, regular coffee breaks, double pay for overtime and even stock options, for heaven’s sake. Sometimes Spiro missed the times when a troublesome worker was thrown out of a high window and that was the end of him. These days, if you threw someone out of a window, they’d phone their lawyer on the way down.

But this Cube could be the answer to his prayers. A once-in-a-lifetime deal, the brass ring. If he could get this weird little gizmo working, the sky was the limit. Literally. The world’s satellites would be his to command. He would have complete control over spy satellites, military lasers, communications networks and, most important of all, television stations. He could feasibly rule the world.

His secretary buzzed from reception.

‘Mister Blunt to see you, sir.’

Spiro jabbed the intercom button.

‘OK, Marlene, send him in. And tell him he better look sorry.’

Blunt did indeed look sorry when he pushed through the double doors. The doors themselves were imposing enough. Spiro had them stolen from the ballroom of the sunken *Titanic*. They were a perfect example of power gone mad.

Arno Blunt was not quite so cocky as he had been in London. Then again, it is difficult to look arrogant when your forehead is a mass of bruises and your mouth is full of gums and nothing else.

Spiro winced at the sight of his sunken cheeks.

‘How many teeth did you lose?’

Blunt touched his jaw gingerly.

‘All ob ’em. Dendish shaid de roods are shaddered.’

‘It serves you right,’ said Spiro matter-of-factly. ‘What do I gotta do, Arno? I hand you Artemis Fowl on a platter and you mess it up. Tell me what happened. And I don’t want to hear about any earthquakes. I want the truth.’

Blunt wiped a blob of drool from the corner of his mouth.

‘I doh undershtan ih. Shomeshin explohduh. I dunno wha’. Shome kinna shoun grenay. Buh I dell you shomeshin. Budlah ish dead. I shod him in de heart. No way he’sh geddin uh affer da.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ snapped Spiro. ‘You’re giving me a headache. The sooner you get those new teeth, the better.’

‘My gumsh wi be healed suffishendly by hish afernoo.’

‘I thought I told you to shut up!’

‘Shorry, bosh.’

‘You’ve put me in a very difficult situation, Arno. Because of your incompetence I had to hire a team from the Antonellis. Carla is a smart girl; she could decide that they deserve a percentage. It would cost me billions.’

Arno tried his best to look remorseful.

‘And don’t bother with the puppy dog look, Blunt. It doesn’t cut any ice with me. If this deal goes south, you’ll be losing a lot more than a couple of teeth.’

Arno decided to change the subject.

‘Sho, di’ your shiendishds geh de Gube worging?’

‘No,’ said Spiro, twisting his gold identity bracelet. ‘Fowl has it sealed up tight. An Eternity Code, or some such thing. That idiot, Pearson, couldn’t get a peep out of it.’

It was at that moment, dramatically, that a voice emanated from the C Cube’s micro-speaker mesh.

‘Mister Spiro?’ said the voice. ‘This is Ireland calling. Do you read, Mister Spiro?’

Jon Spiro was not a man who spooked easily. He hadn’t seen a horror

movie yet that could make him jump in his seat, but the voice coming out of that speaker almost knocked him off his chair. The quality was incredible. Close your eyes and you'd swear that the person speaking was standing right in front of you.

'You wan' me do anshwer da?'

'I told you to shut up! Anyway, I don't know how to answer this thing.'

'I can hear you, Mister Spiro,' said the voice. 'You don't need to do anything. Just talk. The box does the rest.'

Spiro noticed that a digital wave meter had appeared on the Cube's screen. When he spoke it registered.

'OK then. We got communication. Now, who the hell are you? And how did you get this box working?'

'The name is Mo Digence, Mister Spiro. I'm the monkey from Carla Frazetti's team. I don't know what kind of box you have at your end; I just have a plain old telephone.'

'Well, who dialled the number then?'

'A little kid I have here by the scruff of the neck. I impressed upon him how important it was that I talk to you.'

'And how did you know to talk to me? Who gave you my name?'

'Again, the kid. He was very eager to tell me everything after he saw what I did to the metal man.'

Spiro sighed. If the metal man was damaged, he would have to pay the Antonellis a fine.

'What did you do to the metal man?'

'Nothing permanent. But he won't be aiming any guns at kids for a while.'

'Why did you feel it necessary to damage your own partner, Digence?'

There was a pause on the other end while Mulch got the supposed sequence of events sorted out.

'It was like this, Mister Spiro. Our instructions were to escort the

kid across to the US. But Loafers goes crazy and starts waving a gun about. I figured this was the wrong way to go, so I stopped him. Forcibly. Anyway, the kid gets so scared that he tells me everything I want to know. And here I am now having a conversation with you.'

Spiro rubbed his hands together. 'You did the right thing, Digence. There'll be a bonus in this for you. I'll see to it personally.'

'Thanks, Mister Spiro. Believe me, the pleasure was mine.'

'Is the Fowl kid there?'

'Right beside me. A little pale, but not a scratch on him.'

'Put him on,' ordered Spiro, all traces of depression vanishing.

'Spiro, it's me.' Artemis's voice was aloof, but with an unmistakable tremor.

Spiro squeezed the air, as though it were Artemis's neck.

'Not so cocky now, kid? It's like I told you, you don't have the guts for this job. Me, on the other hand, if I don't get what I want, then I'll have Mo put you out of my misery. Do we understand each other?'

'Yes. Loud and clear.'

'Good,' said Spiro, clamping a huge Cuban cigar between his teeth. It would be chewed to a pulp, but not lit. 'Now, talk. What do I have to do to get this Cube working?'

Artemis's voice sounded even shakier than before. 'It's not that simple, Mister Spiro. The C Cube is coded. Something called an Eternity Code. I can remotely access certain basic functions: the phone, MP3 player and so on, but to disable the code completely and unlock the Cube's potential, I need to have it here in front of me. If you could just bring the Cube here...'

Spiro spat out the cigar.

'Hold it right there, Fowl. Just how stupid do you think I am? I'm going to bring this priceless technology back to Europe? Forget it! If you're going to disable this thing, you're going to do it here. In the Spiro Needle!'

'But my tools? My lab?'

'I got tools here. And a lab. The best in the world. You do it here.'

‘Yes. Whatever you say.’

‘That’s right, kid. Whatever I say. I want you to fuel up the Lear jet that I happen to know you have, and do a quick hop across to O’ Hare Airport. I’ll have a chopper waiting for you.’

‘I don’t suppose I have a choice.’

‘That’s right, kid. You don’t. But do this right and I might just let you go. Did you get all that, Digence?’

‘Loud and clear, Mister Spiro.’

‘Good. I’m counting on you to get the kid here safely.’

‘Consider it done.’

The line went dead.

Spiro chuckled.

‘I think I’m going to celebrate,’ he said, punching the intercom button. ‘Marlene, send in a pot of coffee, and no low-caffeine junk either. I want the real thing.’

‘But, Mister Spiro, your doctors said...’

Spiro waited for his secretary to realize who she was arguing with.

‘I’m sorry, sir. Right away, sir.’

Spiro leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head.

‘You see, Blunt. This is going to turn out fine, in spite of your incompetence. I got that kid just where I want him.’

‘Yesh, shir. Mashderfully done, shir.’

Spiro laughed. ‘Shut up, you clown. You sound like some cartoon character.’

‘Yesh. Mosh amushing, shir.’

Spiro licked his lips, anticipating his coffee.

‘For a supposed genius, that kid sure is gullible. Do this right and I might just let you go? He fell for that one hook, line and sinker.’

Blunt tried to grin. It was not a pretty sight.

‘Yesh, Mishduh Shpiro. Hoo, line an’ shinkuh.’

FOWL MANOR

Artemis hung up the phone, his face flushed with the thrill of the sting.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

‘I think he bought it,’ replied Butler.

‘Hook, line and sinker,’ added Mulch. ‘You have a jet? I presume there’s a kitchen.’

Butler drove them to Dublin Airport in the Bentley. It was to be his final act in this particular operation. Holly and Mulch huddled in the back, glad of the tinted glass.

The Butler siblings sat up front, dressed in corresponding black Armani suits. Juliet had jazzed hers up with a pink cravat and glitter make-up. The family resemblance was clear: the same narrow nose and full lips. The same eyes, jumping in their sockets like roulette balls in the wheel. Watching, always watching.

‘You don’t need a traditional gun on this trip,’ said Butler. ‘Use an LEP blaster. They don’t need reloading, they shoot in a straight line forever and they’re non-lethal. I gave Holly a couple from my stash.’

‘Got it, Dom.’

Butler took the airport exit.

‘Dom. I haven’t been called that in so long. Being a bodyguard becomes your world. You forget to have your own life. Are you sure that’s what you want, Juliet?’

Juliet was twining her hair in a tight braid. At the end of the plait she attached an ornamental jade ring. Ornamental and dangerous.

‘Where else would I get to bodyslam people outside of a wrestling ring? Bodyguarding fits the bill, for the moment.’

Butler lowered his voice. ‘Of course, it’s completely against protocol for you to have Artemis as your principal. He already knows your first name and, truth be told, I think he’s a little fond of you.’

Juliet slapped the jade ring against her palm.

‘This is just temporary. I’m not anybody’s bodyguard just yet. Madame Ko doesn’t like my style.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Butler, pointing to the jade ring. ‘Where did you get that?’

Juliet smiled. ‘My own idea. A nice little surprise for anyone who underestimates females.’

Butler pulled into the set-down area.

‘Listen to me, Juliet,’ he said, catching his sister’s hand. ‘Spiro is dangerous. Look what happened to me, and, in all modesty, I was the best. If this mission weren’t so vital to humans and fairies, I wouldn’t let you go at all.’

Juliet touched her brother’s face.

‘I will be careful.’

They climbed on to the walkway. Holly hovered, shielded, just above the throngs of business travellers and holidaymakers. Mulch had applied a fresh layer of sunblock, and the stink repelled every human who was unfortunate enough to pick up his scent.

Butler touched Artemis’s shoulder.

‘Are you going to be all right?’

Artemis shrugged. ‘I honestly don’t know. Without you by my side I feel as though one of my limbs is missing.’

‘Juliet will keep you safe. She has an unusual style, but she is a Butler, after all.’

‘It’s one mission, old friend. Then there will be no more need for bodyguards.’

‘It’s a pity Holly couldn’t have simply mesmerized Spiro through the Cube.’

Artemis shook his head.

‘It wouldn’t have worked. Even if we could have set up a link, a fairy needs eye-to-eye contact to mesmerize a strong mind like Spiro’s. I don’t want to take any chances with this man. He needs to be put away. Even if the fairies relocated him, he could do some damage.’

‘What about your plan?’ Butler asked. ‘From what you told me, it’s quite convoluted. Are you sure it’s going to work?’

Artemis winked – a very unusual display of levity.

‘I’m sure,’ he said. ‘Trust me. I’m a genius.’

Juliet piloted the Lear jet across the Atlantic. Holly sat in the co-pilot’s chair, admiring the hardware.

‘Nice bird,’ she commented.

‘Not bad, fairy girl,’ said Juliet, switching to autopilot. ‘Not a patch on fairy craft, I’d bet?’

‘The LEP doesn’t believe in comfort,’ said Holly. ‘There’s barely enough room in an LEP shuttle to swing a stink worm.’

‘If you wanted to swing a stink worm.’

‘True.’ Holly studied the pilot. ‘You’ve grown a lot in two years. The last time I saw you, you were a little girl.’

Juliet smiled. ‘A lot can happen in two years. I spent most of that time wrestling big hairy men.’

‘You should see fairy wrestling. Two pumped-up gnomes having it out in a zero G chamber. Not a pretty sight. I’ll send you a videodisc.’

‘No, you won’t.’

Holly remembered the mind wipes.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘No, I won’t.’

In the passenger section of the Lear jet, Mulch was reliving his glory days.

‘Hey, Artemis,’ he said, through a mouthful of caviar. ‘Remember the time I nearly blew Butler’s head off with a blast of gas?’

Artemis did not smile. ‘I remember, Mulch. You were the spanner in an otherwise perfect works.’

‘To tell you the truth, it was an accident. I was just nervous. I didn’t even realize the big guy was there.’

‘That makes me feel better. Scuppered by a bowel problem.’

‘And do you remember the time I saved your neck in Kobo Laboratories? If it hadn’t been for me, you’d be locked up in Howler’s

Peak right now. Can't you do anything without me?'

Artemis sipped mineral water from a crystal flute.

'Apparently not, though I live for the day.'

Holly made her way back through the aisle.

'We'd better get you kitted out, Artemis. We land in thirty minutes.'

'Good idea.'

Holly emptied the bag's contents on to the central table.

'OK, what do we need for now? The throat mike and an iris-camera.'

The LEP captain selected what looked like a circular adhesive bandage from the pile. She peeled back the adhesive layer and stuck the material to Artemis's neck. It immediately turned the colour of his skin.

'Memory latex,' explained Holly. 'It's almost invisible. Maybe an ant crawling up your neck might notice it, but apart from that... The material is also X-ray proof, so the mike is undetectable. It will pick up whatever is said within a ten-metre radius, and I record it on my helmet chip. Unfortunately, we can't risk an earpiece – too visible. So we can hear you, but you won't be able to hear us.'

Artemis swallowed, feeling the mike ride on his Adam's apple.

'And the camera?'

'Here we go.'

Holly removed a contact lens from a jar of fluid.

'This thing is a marvel. We've got hi-resolution, digital quality, recordable picture with several filter options, including magnification and thermal.'

Mulch sucked a chicken bone dry.

'You're starting to sound like Foaly.'

Artemis stared at the lens.

'A technological marvel it may be, but it's hazel.'

'Of course it's hazel. My eyes are hazel.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Holly. But my eyes are blue, as you well know.'

This iris-cam will not do.'

'Don't look at me like that, Mud Boy. You're the genius.'

'I can't go in there with one brown eye and one blue eye. Spiro will notice.'

'Well, you should have thought of that while you were meditating. It's a little late now.'

Artemis pinched the bridge of his nose. 'You're right, of course. I am the mastermind here. Thinking is my responsibility, not yours.'

Holly squinted suspiciously. 'Was that an insult, Mud Boy?'

Mulch spat the chicken bone into a nearby bin.

'I have to tell you, Arty, a cock-up this early in the proceedings doesn't exactly fill me with confidence. I hope you're as clever as you keep telling everyone you are.'

'I never tell anybody *exactly* how clever I am. They would be too scared. Very well, we will have to risk the hazel iris-cam. With any luck, Spiro might not notice. If he does, I can invent some excuse.'

Holly placed the camera on the tip of her finger, sliding the lens under Artemis's lid.

'It's your decision, Artemis,' she said. 'I just hope you haven't met your match in Jon Spiro.'

11 P.M., O'HARE AIRPORT, CHICAGO

Spiro was waiting for them at O' Hare's private hangar. He wore a fur-collared greatcoat over his trademark white suit. Halogen lamps blasted the tarmac, and the downdraught from the chopper blades snagged his coat tails. It was all very cinematic.

All we need now is background music, thought Artemis as he descended the motorized steps.

As per instructions, Mulch was putting on the gangster act.

'Move it, kid,' he snarled, quite convincingly. 'We don't want to keep Mister Spiro waiting.'

Artemis was about to respond when he realized that he was

supposed to be the ‘terrified kid’. It wasn’t going to be easy. Being humble was a real problem for Artemis Fowl.

‘I said move it!’ repeated the dwarf, stressing the point with a firm shove.

Artemis stumbled the last few steps, almost colliding with a grinning Arno Blunt. And this was no ordinary grin. Blunt’s teeth had been replaced by a custom-crafted porcelain set. The tips had been filed to sharp points. The bodyguard looked for all the world like a human shark hybrid.

Blunt caught Artemis’s stare.

‘You like ’em? I got other sets too. One is all flat. For crushing stuff.’

A cynical sneer was forming on Artemis’s mouth before he remembered his role, replacing the sneer with a set of quivering lips. He was basing his performance on the effect Butler usually had on people.

Spiro was not impressed.

‘Nice acting, sonny. But pardon me if I doubt the great Artemis Fowl has fallen to pieces quite so easily. Arno, check the plane.’

Blunt nodded curtly, ducking inside the private jet. Juliet was dressed in a flight attendant’s uniform and was straightening the headrest covers. For all her athletic ability, she was finding it difficult not to fall out of her high heels.

‘Where’s the pilot?’ growled Blunt, living up to his name.

‘Master Artemis flies the plane,’ replied Juliet. ‘He’s been flying it since he was eleven years old.’

‘Oh, really? Is that legal?’

Juliet put on her best innocent face. ‘I don’t know about legal, Mister. I just serve the drinks.’

Blunt grunted, charming as ever, and had a quick poke about the jet’s interior. Eventually he decided to accept the flight attendant’s word. Lucky for him, because had he decided to argue, two things would have happened. First, Juliet would have clobbered him with

the jade ring. And second, Holly, who was lying shielded in an overhead locker, would have blasted him into unconsciousness with her Neutrino 2000. Of course, Holly could simply have mesmerized the bodyguard, but after what he had done to Butler, a blasting seemed more appropriate.

Blunt stuck his head through the hatch.

‘No one in there except some dumb attendant.’

Spiro was not surprised.

‘I didn’t think so. But they’re here somewhere. Believe it or not, Digence, Artemis Fowl did not get suckered by a goon like you. He’s here because he wants to be here.’

Artemis was not surprised by this deduction. It was only natural that Spiro should be suspicious.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he said. ‘I’m here because this odious little man threatened to crush my skull between his teeth. Why else would I come? The C Cube is useless to you, and I could easily construct another one.’

Spiro was not even listening.

‘Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, kid. But let me tell you something. You bit off more than you could chew when you agreed to come here. The Spiro Needle has the best security on the planet. We’ve got stuff in there that even the military don’t have. Once those doors close behind you, you’re on your own. Nobody is coming to save you. Nobody. Understand?’

Artemis nodded. He understood what Spiro was saying to him. That wasn’t to say that he agreed with it. Jon Spiro might have *stuff* that the military didn’t have, but Artemis Fowl had *stuff* that humans had never seen.

A Sikorsky executive helicopter whisked them downtown to the Spiro Needle. They landed on a helipad on the skyscraper’s roof. Artemis was familiar with helicopter controls, and realized how difficult it must be to land in the bluster of the Windy City.

‘The wind speed must be treacherous at this altitude,’ he said casually. Holly could record the information on her helmet chip.

‘You’re telling me,’ shouted the pilot over the rotors’ din. ‘It gets over sixty miles an hour on top of the Needle. The helipad can sway up to ten metres in rough conditions.’

Spiro groaned, giving Blunt a nod. Arno reached forward and whacked the pilot’s helmet.

‘Shut up, you moron!’ snapped Spiro. ‘Why don’t you give him the blueprints to the building while you’re at it?’ He turned to Artemis. ‘And in case you’re wondering, Arty, there aren’t any blueprints floating around. Anybody who goes looking in City Hall is going to find that file mysteriously missing. I have the only set, so don’t bother getting one of your associates to do an Internet search.’

No surprises there. Artemis had already run several searches himself, although he hadn’t really expected Spiro to be so careless.

They climbed down from the Sikorsky. Artemis was careful to point the iris-cam at any security feature that could be useful later. Butler had often told him that even a seemingly insignificant detail, like the number of steps in a stairwell, could be vital when planning an operation.

A lift brought them down from the helipad to a key-coded door. Closed-circuit cameras were strategically placed to cover the entire rooftop. Spiro moved ahead to the keypad. Artemis felt a sharp sting in his eye and suddenly the iris-cam magnified his vision by four. In spite of the distance and shadows he could easily discern the entry code.

‘I hope you got that,’ he muttered, feeling the mike vibrating on his throat.

Arno Blunt bent his knees, so his extraordinary teeth were a centimetre from Artemis’s nose.

‘Are you talking to someone?’

‘Me?’ said Artemis. ‘Who would I be talking to? We’re eighty floors up, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

Blunt grabbed the teenager by the lapels, hoisting him off the tarmac.

‘Maybe you’re wearing a wire. Maybe you have someone listening to us right now.’

‘How could I be wearing a wire, you big oaf? Your miniature hit man hasn’t let me out of his sight for the entire journey. He even accompanied me to the bathroom.’

Spiro cleared his throat noisily.

‘Hey there, Mister I-Gotta-Make-My-Point, that kid slips over the side and you might as well throw yourself off, because that boy is worth more to me than an army of bodyguards.’

Blunt set Artemis down.

‘You’re not going to be valuable forever, Fowl,’ he whispered ominously. ‘And when your stock falls, I’ll be waiting.’

They took a mirrored lift to the eighty-fifth floor, where Doctor Pearson waited, along with two more muscle-bound minders. Artemis could tell by the look in their eyes that these two weren’t exactly brain surgeons. In fact, they were as close as you could get to Rottweillers still balanced on two legs. It was probably handy to have them around to break things and not ask questions.

Spiro called one of them over.

‘Pex, do you know what the Antonellis charge if you lose their personnel?’

Pex had to consider it for a moment. His lips moved as he thought.

‘Yeah, wait, I got it. Twenty grand for a metal man and fifteen for a monkey.’

‘That’s dead, right?’

‘Dead or incapaci... incatacip... broken.’

‘OK,’ said Spiro. ‘I want you and Chips to go over to Carla Frazetti’s and tell her I owe her thirty-five grand for the team. I’ll wire it to her Cayman account in the morning.’

Mulch was understandably curious, and not a little apprehensive.

‘Excuse me? Thirty-five grand? But I’m still alive. You only owe twenty grand for Loafers, unless the extra fifteen K is my bonus?’

Spiro sighed with almost convincing regret.

‘This is the way it is, Mo,’ he said, punching Mulch playfully on the shoulder. ‘This deal is huge. Mammoth. We’re talking telephone numbers. I can’t afford any loose ends. Maybe you know something, maybe you don’t. But I’m not about to take the chance that you might tip off Phonetix or one of my other competitors. I’m sure you understand.’

Mulch stretched his lips, revealing a row of tombstone teeth.

‘I understand all right, Spiro. You’re a back-stabbing snake. You know, the kid offered me two million dollars to cut him loose.’

‘You should have taken the cash,’ said Arno Blunt, propelling Mulch into Pex’s gigantic arms.

The dwarf kept talking, even as he was being dragged down the corridor.

‘You better bury me deep, Spiro. You better bury me real deep.’

Spiro’s eyes narrowed to wet slits.

‘You heard the man, boys. Before you go to Frazetti’s, bury him deep.’

Doctor Pearson led the party through to the vault room. They had to pass through a small antechamber before entering the main security area.

‘Please stand on the scanner pad,’ said Pearson. ‘We wouldn’t want any bugs in here. Especially not the electronic kind.’

Artemis stepped on to the mat. It sank like a sponge beneath his feet, spurting jets of foam over his shoes.

‘Anti-infection foam,’ explained Pearson. ‘Kills any virus you might have picked up. We’re keeping some bio-technology experiments in the vault at the moment. Very susceptible to disease. The foam has the added advantage of shorting out any surveillance devices in your shoes.’

Overhead a mobile scanner bathed Artemis's frame in purple light.

'One of my own inventions,' said Pearson. 'A combination scanner. I have incorporated thermal, X-Ray and metal-detector beams. The beam basically breaks your body down into its elements and displays them on this screen here.'

Artemis saw a 3D replica of himself being traced out on the small plasma screen. He held his breath, praying that Foaly's equipment was as clever as the centaur thought it was.

On-screen, a red light pulsed on Artemis's jacket front.

'Aha,' said Doctor Pearson, plucking off a button. 'What have we here?' He cracked the button open, revealing a tiny chip, mike and power source.

'Very clever. A micro-bug. Our young friend was attempting to spy on us, Mister Spiro.'

Jon Spiro was not angry. In fact, he was delighted to have the opportunity to gloat.

'You see, kid. You may be some kind of genius, but surveillance and espionage are my business. You can't slip anything past me. And the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can get this thing over with.'

Artemis stepped off the pad. The decoy had worked, and the real bugs hadn't caused a blip in the system. Pearson was smart, but Foaly was smarter.

Artemis made sure he had a good look around the antechamber. There was more here. Every square centimetre of the metal surface contained a security or surveillance device. From what Artemis could see, an invisible ant would have trouble sneaking in. Not to mention two humans, an elf and a dwarf – assuming the dwarf survived Pex and Chips.

The vault door itself was impressive. Most corporate vaults *looked* impressive, plenty of chrome and keypads, but that was just to make an impression on stockholders. In Spiro's vault there wasn't a tumbler out of place. Artemis spotted the very latest computer lock on the face of titanium double doors. Spiro keyed in another complicated series

of numbers, and the metre-thick doors slid back to reveal another barrier. The secondary door.

‘Imagine you are a thief,’ said Spiro, an actor introducing a play, ‘and you somehow get into the building, past the electronic eyes and the locked doors. Then imagine you somehow cheat the lasers, the sensor pad and the door code, and open the first vault door – an impossible feat by the way. And while we’re imagining all this, let’s pretend you disable the half dozen cameras, and even then, even after all that, would you be able to do this?’

Spiro stood on a small red plate on the floor in front of the door. He placed a thumb on a gel-print scanner, held his left eyelid open and enunciated clearly.

‘Jon Spiro. I am the boss, so open up quick.’

Four things happened. A retinal scanner filmed his left eye and fed the image into the computer. A print plate scanned his right thumb, and a vocal analyser scrutinized his voice’s accent, timbre and intonations. Once the computer had verified all this information, the alarms were deactivated and the secondary door slid open to reveal an expansive vault.

In the very middle, in the centre of a custom-made steel column, rested the C Cube. It was enclosed in a perspex case, with at least six cameras focused on its various planes. Two burly guards stood back to back, forming a human barrier in front of the fairy technology.

Spiro could not resist a jibe. ‘Unlike you,’ he said, ‘I look after my technology. This is the only vault of its kind in the world.’

‘Live security in an airtight room. Interesting.’

‘These guys are trained at high altitude. Also, we change the guards on the hour, and they all carry oxygen cylinders to keep them going. What did you think? I was going to put air vents into a vault?’

Artemis scowled. ‘No need to show off, Spiro. I’m here; you win. So can we get on with it?’

Spiro punched a final number sequence into the column’s keypad and the perspex panes retracted. He took the Cube from its foam nest.

‘Overkill, don’t you think?’ commented Artemis. ‘All of this is hardly necessary.’

‘You never know. Some crooked businessman could attempt to relieve me of my prize.’

Artemis took a chance on some calculated sarcasm.

‘Really, Spiro. Did you think I would attempt a break-in? Perhaps you thought I would fly in here with my fairy friends and magic your box away?’

Spiro laughed. ‘You can bring all the fairy friends you like, Arty boy. Short of a miracle that Cube is staying right where it is.’

Juliet was an American citizen by birth, even though her brother had been born on the other side of the world. She was glad to be back in her home country. The discord of Chicago’s traffic and the constant chorus of multicultural voices made her feel at home. She loved the skyscrapers and the steam vents and the affectionate sarcasm of the street vendors. If she ever got the chance to settle down, it would be in the US. On the west coast though, somewhere with sun.

Juliet and Holly were circling the Spiro Needle in a blacked out mini-van. Holly sat in the back, watching the live video feed from Artemis’s iris-cam on her helmet visor.

At one point she punched the air triumphantly.

Juliet stopped at a red light. ‘How are we doing?’

‘Not bad,’ replied the fairy, raising her visor. ‘They’re taking Mulch to bury him.’

‘Cool. Just like Artemis said they would.’

‘And Spiro has just invited all of Artemis’s fairy friends into the building.’

This was a crucial development. The Book forbade fairies from entering human buildings without an invitation. Now Holly was free to break in and wreak havoc without violating fairy doctrine.

‘Excellent,’ said Juliet. ‘We’re in. I get to bodyslam the guy who shot my brother.’

‘Not so fast. This building has the most sophisticated Mud Man security system I’ve seen. Spiro has a few tricks in there that I’ve never come across before.’

Juliet finally found a space opposite the Needle’s main revolving doors.

‘No problem for the little horsey guy, surely?’

‘No, but Foaly’s not supposed to help us.’

Juliet focused a set of binoculars on the door. ‘I know, but it all depends on how you ask. A smart guy like Foaly – what he needs is a challenge.’

Three figures emerged from the Needle. Two large men in black and a smaller, nervous-looking individual. Mulch’s feet were treading air so fast that he seemed to be performing an Irish jig. Not that he had any hope of escaping. Pex and Chips had him tighter than two badgers fighting over a bone.

‘Here comes Mulch now. We better give him back-up. Just in case.’

Holly strapped on her mechanical harness, extending the wings with the touch of a button.

‘I’ll follow them from the air. You keep an eye on Artemis.’

Juliet ran a video lead from one of the spare helmets’ hand-held computers. Artemis’s point of view sprang to life on the screen.

‘Do you really think Mulch needs help?’ she asked.

Holly buzzed into invisibility. ‘Help? I’m just going along to make sure he doesn’t harm those two Mud Men.’

Inside the vault, Spiro was finished playing the gracious host.

‘Let me tell you a little story, Arty,’ he said, lovingly caressing the C Cube. ‘There was this Irish kid who thought he was ready for the big time. So he messed with a very serious businessman.’

Don’t call me Arty, thought Artemis. My father calls me Arty.

‘This businessman didn’t appreciate being messed with, so he messed back, and this kid is dragged kicking and screaming into the real world. So now this kid has to make a choice: does he tell the

businessman what he needs to know, or does he put himself and his family in mortal danger? Well, Arty, which one is it?’

Spiro was making a serious mistake by toying with Artemis Fowl. It was difficult for adults to believe that this pale-faced thirteen-year-old could actually be a threat. Artemis had tried to take advantage of this by wearing casual clothes in place of his usual designer suit. He had also been practising an innocent, wide-eyed look on the jet, but wide-eyed was not how you wanted to look when one iris did not match the other.

Blunt prodded Artemis between the shoulder blades.

‘Mister Spiro asked you a question.’ His new teeth clicked as he talked.

‘I’m here, am I not?’ replied Artemis. ‘I’ll do whatever you wish.’

Spiro placed the Cube on a long steel table that ran down the centre of the vault.

‘What I wish is for you to disable your Eternity Code, and get this Cube working right now.’

Artemis wished that he could make himself perspire so that his anxiety would seem more authentic.

‘Right now? It’s not that simple.’

Spiro grabbed Artemis by the shoulders, staring him in the eye.

‘And why wouldn’t it be that simple? Just punch in the code word and away we go.’

Artemis averted his mismatched eyes, staring at the floor.

‘There is no straightforward code word. An Eternity Code is built to be irreversible. I have to reconstruct an entire language. It could take days.’

‘Don’t you have any notes?’

‘Yes. On disk. In Ireland. Your monkey wouldn’t let me bring anything in case it was booby-trapped.’

‘Can we access your hard drive online?’

‘Yes. But I only keep my notes on disk. We could fly back to

Ireland. Eighteen hours, round trip.'

Spiro wouldn't even consider that option. 'Forget it. As long as I have you here, I'm in control. Who knows what kind of reception is waiting for me in Ireland? We do it here. As long as it takes.'

Artemis sighed. 'Very well.'

Spiro replaced the Cube in its perspex case.

'Get a good night's sleep, kid, because tomorrow you're going to peel this gizmo apart like an onion. And if you don't, what's about to happen to Mo Digence will happen to you.'

Artemis wasn't unduly worried by that threat. He didn't believe Mulch to be in any danger. In fact, if anyone was in trouble, it was those two musclemen Pex and Chips.

CHAPTER 9: GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

VACANT LOT, MALTHOUSE INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, SOUTH CHICAGO



JON Spiro had not hired Pex and Chips for their debating skills. In the job interview they had only been set one task. A hundred applicants were handed a walnut and asked to smash it however they could. Only two succeeded. Pex had shouted at the walnut for a few minutes, then flattened it between his giant palms. Chips opted for a more controversial method. He placed the walnut on the table, grabbed his interviewer by the ponytail and used the man's forehead to smash the nut. Both men were hired on the spot. They quickly established themselves as Arno Blunt's most reliable lieutenants for in-house work. They were not allowed outside Chicago as this could involve map reading – something Pex and Chips were not very good at.

At the moment, Pex and Chips were bonding under a full moon while Mulch dug a dwarf-sized pit in the dry clay behind an abandoned cement factory.

'You wanna guess why they call me Pex?' asked Pex, flexing his chest muscles as a hint.

Chips opened a packet of the potato chips he was forever crunching.

'I dunno. Is it, like, short for something?'

'Like what?'

'I dunno,' said Chips. He used the phrase a lot. 'Francis?'

This sounded dumb, even to Pex. ‘Francis? How could Pex be short for Francis?’

Chips shrugged. ‘Hey. I had an Uncle Robert and everyone called him Bobby. That don’t make no sense neither.’

Pex rolled his eyes. ‘It’s pec-tor-als, moron. Pex is short for pectorals, on account of me having big chest muscles.’

In the pit, Mulch groaned. Listening to this mindless banter was almost as bad as having to dig a hole with a shovel. Mulch was tempted to deviate from the plan and launch himself into the flaky soil. But Artemis did not want any display of fairy powers at this stage of the proceedings. If he took off, and these goons escaped without being mesmerized, then Spiro’s paranoia would be driven up another notch.

On the surface, Chips was eager to continue the game.

‘Guess why they call me Chips,’ he said, hiding the bag of chips behind his back.

Pex kneaded his forehead. He knew this one.

‘Don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘I can work it out.’

Mulch poked his head from the hole. ‘It’s because he eats chips, you idiot. Chips eats chips. You two are the thickest Mud Men I have ever met. Why don’t you just kill me? At least I won’t have to listen to your drivel.’

Pex and Chips were stunned. With all the mental exercise, they had almost forgotten about the little man in the hole. Plus, they were unaccustomed to prospective victims saying anything besides, ‘Oh no, please, God, no.’

Pex leaned over the grave’s lip. ‘What do you mean *drivel*?’

‘I mean that whole *Chips Pex* thing.’

Pex shook his head. ‘No, I mean what does the word “drivel” mean? I’ve never heard that one.’

Mulch was delighted to explain. ‘It means rubbish, garbage, claptrap, twaddle, baloney. Is that clear enough for you?’

Chips recognized the last one. ‘Baloney? Hey, that’s an insult! Are

you insulting us, little man?’

Mulch clasped his hands in mock prayer. ‘Finally, a breakthrough.’

The musclemen were uncertain how to react to actual abuse. There were only two people alive who insulted them regularly: Arno Blunt and Jon Spiro. But that was part of the job – you just ignored that by turning up the music in your head.

‘Do we have to listen to his smart mouth?’ Pex asked his partner.

‘I don’t think so. Maybe I should phone Mister Blunt.’

Mulch groaned. If stupidity were a crime, these two would be public enemies one and two.

‘What you should do is kill me. That was the idea, wasn’t it? Just kill me and get it over with.’

‘What do you think, Chips? Should we just kill him?’

Chips chewed on a handful of barbecue Ruffles. ‘Yeah. Course. Orders is orders.’

‘But I wouldn’t *just* kill me,’ interjected Mulch.

‘You wouldn’t?’

‘Oh no. After the way I just insulted your intelligence? No, I deserve something special.’

You could almost see the steam coming out of Pex’s ears as his brain overheated.

‘That’s right, little man. We’re gonna do something special to you. We don’t take no insults from anybody!’

Mulch did not bother pointing out the double negative.

‘You’re right. I’ve got a smart mouth, and I deserve everything I’ve got coming to me.’

There followed a short silence as Pex and Chips tried to come up with something worse than the usual straight shooting.

Mulch gave them a minute, then made a polite suggestion.

‘If it were me, I’d bury me alive.’

Chips was horrified.

‘Bury you alive? That’s terrible! You’d be screaming and clawing

the dirt. I could get nightmares.'

'I promise to lie still. Anyway, I deserve it. I did call you a pair of overdeveloped, single-celled Cro-Magnons.'

'Did you?'

'Well, I have now.'

Pex was the more impulsive of the duo. 'OK, Mister Digence. You know what we're gonna do? We're going to bury you alive.'

Mulch clapped two hands to his cheeks. 'Oh, the horror!'

'You asked for it, buddy.'

'I did, didn't I?'

Pex grabbed a spare shovel from the boot. 'Nobody calls me an overdeveloped, signal bell crow magnet.'

Mulch lay down obligingly in his grave. 'No. I bet nobody does.'

Pex shovelled furiously, gymnasium-sculpted muscles stretching his suit jacket. In minutes, Mulch's form was completely covered.

Chips was feeling a bit squeamish. 'That was horrible. Horrible. That poor little guy.'

Pex was unrepentant. 'Yeah, well, he asked for it. Calling us... all those things.'

'But buried alive?! That's like in that horror movie. Y'know, the one with all the horror.'

'I think I saw that one. With all the words going up the screen at the end?'

'Yeah, that was it. Tell you the truth, those words kinda ruined it for me.'

Pex stamped on the loose earth. 'Don't worry, buddy. There are no words in this movie.'

They climbed back into their Chevrolet automobile. Chips was still a bit upset.

'You know, it's much more real than a movie when it's real.'

Pex ignored a no-access sign and pulled on to the motorway. 'It's the smell. You can't smell stuff in a movie.'

Chips sniffed emotionally. ‘Digence musta been upset right there at the end.’

‘I’m not surprised.’

‘Cause I could see him cryin’. His shoulders were shaking, like he was laughing. But he must have been crying. I mean, what sort of crazy whacko would laugh when he’s getting buried alive?’

‘He musta been crying.’

Chips opened a bag of smoky bacon curls.

‘Yeah. He musta been crying.’

Mulch was laughing so much that he nearly choked on the first mouthful of soil. What a pair of clowns! Then again, it was lucky for them that they *had* been clowns, otherwise they might have chosen their *own* method of execution.

Jaw unhinged, Mulch tunnelled straight down for five metres and then veered north to the cover of some abandoned warehouses. His beard hair sent out sonar signals in all directions. You couldn’t be too careful in built-up areas. There was always some wildlife, and Mud People had a habit of burying things in places you wouldn’t expect them. Pipes, septic tanks and barrels of industrial waste were all things he had taking an unwitting bite of in his day. And there is nothing worse than finding something in your mouth that you weren’t expecting to be there, especially if it’s wriggling.

It felt good to be tunnelling again. This was what dwarfs were born to do. The earth felt right between his fingers, and he soon settled into his distance rhythm. Scooping muck between his grinding teeth, breathing through slitted nostrils, and pumping waste material out the other end.

Mulch’s hair antennae informed him that there were no vibrations on the surface, so he kicked upwards using the last vestiges of dwarf gas to propel him from his hole.

Holly caught him a metre from the ground.

‘Charming,’ she said.

‘What can I tell you?’ said Mulch unapologetically. ‘I’m a force of nature. You were up there all that time?’

‘Yes, just in case things got out of hand. You put on quite a show.’

Mulch slapped the clay from his clothes. ‘A couple of Neutrino blasts could have saved me a lot of digging.’

Holly smiled in spooky imitation of Artemis. ‘That’s not in *the plan*. And we must stick to *the plan* now, mustn’t we?’

She draped a sheet of cam foil around the dwarf’s shoulders, and hooked him on to her Moonbelt.

‘Take it easy now, won’t you?’ said Mulch anxiously. ‘Dwarfs are creatures of the soil. We don’t like flying; we don’t even like jumping too high.’

Holly opened the throttle on her wings, heading downtown.

‘I’ll be just as considerate of your feelings as you are of the LEP’s.’

Mulch paled. Funny how this diminutive elf was much scarier than two six-foot hit men.

‘Holly, if I ever did anything to offend you, I unreservedly –’

He never finished that particular sentence, because their sudden acceleration forced the words back down his throat.

THE SPIRO NEEDLE

Arno Blunt walked Artemis to his cell. It was comfortable enough, with its own bathroom and entertainment system. There were a couple of things missing: windows and a handle on the door.

Blunt patted Artemis on the head.

‘I don’t know what happened in that London restaurant, but you try anything like that here, and I will turn you inside out and eat your organs.’ He gnashed his pointy teeth to make the point and leaned close, whispering into Artemis’s ear. Artemis could hear the teeth click with every syllable.

‘I don’t care what the boss says, you’re not going to be useful forever, so if I were you, I’d be very nice to me.’

‘If you were me,’ responded Artemis, ‘then I’d be you, and if I were you, then I’d hide somewhere far away.’

‘Oh, really? And why would you do that?’

Artemis paused to give him the full effect of his words.

‘Because Butler is coming for you. And he’s extremely annoyed.’

Blunt backed off a few steps. ‘No way, kid. I saw him go down. I saw the blood.’

Artemis grinned. ‘I didn’t say he was alive. I just said he was coming.’

‘You’re just messing with my mind. Mister Spiro warned me about this.’

Blunt edged out of the door, never taking his eyes off Artemis.

‘Don’t worry, Blunt. I don’t have him here in my pocket. You have hours, maybe days, before the time comes.’

Arno Blunt slammed the door so hard that the frame shook. Artemis’s grin widened. Every cloud had a silver lining.

Artemis stepped into the shower, allowing the jet of hot water to pound him on the forehead. In truth, he felt a little anxious. It was one thing to formulate a plan in the safety of one’s own home. It was quite another to execute that plan while trapped in the lion’s den. And even though he would never admit it, his confidence had taken quite a pounding in the last few days. Spiro had outwitted him back in London, and without apparent effort. He had strolled into the entrepreneur’s trap as naively as a tourist down a back alley.

Artemis was well aware of his talents. He was a plotter, a schemer, a planner of dastardly deeds. There was no thrill greater than the execution of a perfect plan. But lately his victories had been tainted by guilt, especially over what had happened to Butler. Artemis had been so close to losing his old friend that it made him queasy just thinking about it.

Things had to change. His father would be watching soon, hoping that Artemis would make the right choices. And if he didn’t, Artemis

Senior would quite possibly take those choices away from him. He remembered his father's words. *'And what about you, Arty? Will you make the journey with me? When the moment comes will you take your chance to be a hero?'*

Artemis still did not have the answer to that question.

Artemis wrapped himself in a robe monogrammed with his captor's initials. Not only was Spiro reminding him of his presence with the gold letters, but a motion-sensitive closed-circuit camera was following Artemis around the room.

Artemis focused on the challenging task of breaking into Spiro's vault and stealing back the C Cube. He had anticipated many of Spiro's security measures and packed accordingly. Although some were unforeseen and quite ingenious, Artemis had fairy technology on his side, and hopefully Foaly too. The centaur had been ordered not to help, but if Holly presented the break-in as a test, Artemis felt sure that the centaur would be unable to resist.

He sat on the bed, casually scratching his neck. The mike's latex covering had survived the shower, as Holly had assured him it would. It was comforting to know that he was not alone in his prison.

Because the microphone operated on vibrations, Artemis did not have to speak aloud for his instructions to be transmitted.

'Good evening, friends,' he whispered, his back to the camera. 'Everything proceeds according to plan, taking it as read that Mulch made it back alive. I must warn you to expect a visit from Spiro's goons. I am certain his personnel have been monitoring the streets, and it should lull him into a false sense of security if he believes my people to be wiped out. Mister Spiro has kindly given me a tour of the facility, and hopefully you have recorded everything we need to complete our mission. I believe the local term for this kind of operation is *heist*. This is what I want you to do.'

Artemis whispered slowly, enunciating each point clearly. It was vital that his team members followed his instructions to the letter. If they did not, the entire plot could explode like an active volcano. And

at the moment, he was sitting in the volcano's crater.

Pex and Chips were in a good mood. On their return to the Needle, not only had Mister Blunt handed over their five-grand bonus for the Mo Digence job, but he had also given them another assignment. The Needle's external surveillance cameras had picked up a black van parked opposite the main door. It had been there for over three hours and a review of the tapes showed the vehicle circling the building for over an hour looking for a space. Mister Spiro had warned them to look out for suspicious vehicles, and this was certainly suspicious.

'Go down there,' Blunt had ordered from his chair in the security office. 'And if there's anything breathing inside, ask them why they're breathing outside my building.'

This was the kind of instruction that Pex and Chips understood. No asking questions, no operating complex machinery. Just open the door, scare everything, close the door. Easy. They kidded around in the lift, punching each other in the shoulder until their upper arms went numb.

'We could make big bucks tonight, partner,' said Pex, massaging his biceps to get the circulation going.

'We sure could,' enthused Chips, thinking about all the *Barney* DVDs he could buy. 'This must be worth another bonus. Five grand at least. Altogether that's...'

There followed several moments' silence while both men counted on their fingers.

'That's a lot of cash,' said Pex finally.

'A lot of cash,' agreed Chips.

Juliet had her binoculars trained on the Needle's revolving door. It would have been easier to use the Optix on a fairy helmet, but unfortunately her head had grown too large in the past couple of years. That wasn't the only thing to have changed. Juliet had transformed from gangly kid to toned athlete. She wasn't perfect bodyguard material though; there were still a few wrinkles to be

ironed out. Personality wrinkles.

Juliet Butler was a fun-loving creature; she couldn't help it. She found the idea of standing po-faced at the shoulder of some opinionated politician appalling. She'd go crazy from boredom – unless Artemis asked her to stay on professionally. A person could never be bored at Artemis Fowl's side. But that was not likely to happen. Artemis had assured everyone that this was his last job. After Chicago he was going straight. If there was an after Chicago.

This stakeout business was boring too. Sitting quietly was not in Juliet's nature. Her hyperactive disposition had caused her to fail more than one class at Madame Ko's Academy.

'Be at peace with yourself, girl,' the Japanese instructor had said. 'Find that quiet place at your core and inhabit it.'

Juliet generally had to stifle a yawn when Madame Ko started on the kung fu wisdom stuff. Butler, on the other hand, ate it up. He was forever finding his *quiet place* and inhabiting it. In fact, he only came out of his *quiet place* to pulverize whoever was threatening Artemis at the time. Maybe that was why he had his blue diamond tattoo and Juliet didn't.

Two burly figures emerged from the Needle. They were grinning and punching each other on the shoulder.

'Captain Short, we're on,' said Juliet into a walkie-talkie tuned to Holly's frequency.

'Understood,' responded Holly from her position above the Spiro Needle. 'How many hostiles?'

'Two. Big and dumb.'

'You need back-up?'

'Negative. I'll wrap these two. You can have a word on your return.'

'OK. I'll be down in five, as soon as I've had a talk with Foaly. And, Juliet, don't mark them.'

'Understood.'

Juliet switched off the radio, climbing into the rear of the van. She swept a pile of surveillance equipment under a fold-up seat, just in

case the two heavies actually managed to incapacitate her. It wasn't likely, but her brother would hide the incriminating equipment just in case. Juliet pulled off her suit jacket and placed a baseball cap backwards on her head. She then popped the rear door and clambered out on to the road.

Pex and Chips crossed State Street to the suspect van. It certainly looked suspicious, with its blacked-out windows, but the pair were not unduly concerned. Every testosterone-fuelled college freshman had blacked-out windows these days.

'Whatcha think?' Pex asked his partner.

Chips curled his fingers into fists. 'I think we don't bother knocking.'

Pex nodded. This was the plan that they generally went with. Chips would have proceeded to wrench the door from its hinges had a young lady not appeared from around the bonnet.

'You guys looking for my dad?' said the girl in perfect MTV tones. 'People are always, like, looking for him, and he's never around. Daddy is so not here. And I mean that spiritually.'

Pex and Chips blinked in unison. The blink being universal body language for 'Huh?' This girl was a stunning blend of Asian and Caucasian, but she might as well have been talking Greek for all the comprehension that registered on the security men's faces. 'Spiritually' had five syllables, for heaven's sake.

'You own this van?' asked Chips, taking the offensive.

The girl twisted her ponytail. 'As much as any of us can, like, own anything. One world, one people, right, man? Ownership is, like, you know, an illusion. Maybe we don't even own our own bodies. We could be, like, the daydreams of some greater spirit.'

Pex cracked.

'Do you own the van?' he shouted, wrapping thumb and forefinger round the girl's neck.

The girl nodded. There wasn't enough air in her windpipe for

speech.

‘That’s better. Anyone inside?’

A shake of the head this time.

Pex relaxed his grip slightly.

‘How many more in the family?’

The girl answered in a whisper, using as little air as possible.

‘Seven. Dad, Mom, two grandparents and the triplets: Beau, Mo and Joe. They’re gone for sushi.’

Pex cheered up considerably. Triplets and grandparents, that didn’t sound like any problem.

‘OK. We wait. Open her up, kid.’

‘Sushi?’ said Chips. ‘That’s raw fish. You ever have that, buddy?’

Pex held the girl by the neck while she fiddled with the key.

‘Yeah. I bought some in the supermarket once.’

‘Was it good?’

‘Yeah. I threw it in the deep-fat fryer for ten minutes. Not bad.’

The girl slid back the van door and climbed into the interior. Pex and Chips followed, ducking under the rim. Pex released the girl’s neck momentarily to take the step. That was his mistake. A properly trained private soldier would never allow an untethered prisoner to lead the way into an unsecured vehicle.

The girl stumbled accidentally, dropping to both knees on the interior’s carpet.

‘Sushi,’ said Pex. ‘It’s good with French fries.’

Then the girl’s foot snapped back, catching him in the chest. The hired muscle collapsed, gasping, on to the floor.

‘Oops,’ said the girl, straightening. ‘Accident.’

Chips thought he must be having some kind of waking dream, because there was no way a little pop princess clone could have decked ninety kilograms of muscle and attitude.

‘You... you just...,’ he stuttered. ‘That’s impossible. No way.’

‘Way,’ said Juliet, pirouetting like a ballerina. The jade ring in her

ponytail swung round, loaded with centrifugal force. It struck Chips between the eyeballs, like a stone from a sling. He staggered backwards, landing in a heap on a leatherette sofa.

Behind her, Pex's breath was returning. His eyeballs stopped rolling wildly and focused on his assailant.

'Hi,' said Juliet, bending over him. 'Guess what.'

'What?' said Pex.

'You're not supposed to deep-fry sushi,' said the girl, clapping the assassin on both temples with the palms of her hands.

Unconsciousness was immediate.

Mulch emerged from the bathroom, buttoning the bum-flap on his tunnelling trousers.

'What did I miss?' he asked.

*

Holly hovered one hundred and fifty feet above Chicago's downtown district – known locally as the Loop after the curve of elevated track that enclosed the area. She was up there for two reasons. Firstly, they needed an X-ray scan of the Spiro Needle in order to construct 3D blueprints. And secondly, she wanted to talk to Foaly alone.

She spotted a stone eagle perched on the roof of an early twentieth-century apartment block, and alighted on its head. She would have to move perch after a few minutes, or her shield vibration would begin to pulverize the rock.

Juliet's voice sounded in her earpiece.

'Captain Short, we're on.'

'Understood,' responded Holly. 'How many hostiles?'

'Two. Big and dumb.'

'You need back-up?'

'Negative. I'll wrap these two. You can have a word on your return.'

'OK. I'll be down in five, as soon as I've had a talk with Foaly. And, Juliet, don't mark them.'

‘Understood.’

Holly smiled. Juliet was a piece of work. A chip off the Butler block. But she was a wild card. Even on stakeout she couldn’t stop chattering for more than ten seconds. None of her brother’s discipline. She was a happy teenager. A kid. She should not be in this line of business. Artemis had no business dragging her into his crazy schemes. But there was something about the Irish boy that made you forget your reservations. In the past sixteen months she had fought a troll for him, healed his entire family, dived into the Arctic Ocean and now she was preparing to disobey a direct order from Commander Root.

She opened a channel to LEP Operations.

‘Foaly. Are you listening?’

Nothing for several seconds, then the centaur’s voice burst through the helmet’s micro-speaker.

‘Holly. Hold on. You’re a bit fuzzy; I’m just going to fine-tune the wavelength. Talk to me. Say something.’

‘Testing. One two. One two. Trolls cause terrible trouble in a tantrum.’

‘OK. Gotcha. Crystal clear. How goes it in the Land of Mud?’

Holly gazed down at the city below her.

‘No mud here. Just glass, steel and computers. You’d like it.’

‘Oh no. Not me. Mud People are Mud People, no matter if they’re wearing suits or loincloths. The only good thing about humans is the television. All we get on PPTV is reruns. I’m almost sorry the goblin generals’ trial is over. Guilty on all counts, thanks to you. Sentencing is next month.’

Anxiety loosened its grip on Holly’s stomach. ‘Guilty. Thank heavens. Things can finally go back to normal.’

Foaly snickered. ‘Normal? You’re in the wrong job for normal. You can kiss normal goodbye if we don’t get Artemis’s gizmo back from Spiro.’

The centaur was right. Her life had not been *normal* since she’d

been promoted to Recon from the vice squad. But did she really want a normal life? Wasn't that the reason she transferred from vice in the first place?

'So why the call?' asked Foaly. 'Feeling a bit homesick, are you?'

'No,' replied Holly. And it was true. She wasn't. The elf captain had barely thought of Haven since Artemis embroiled her in his latest intrigue. 'I need your advice.'

'Advice? Oh, really? That wouldn't be another way of asking for help now, would it? I believe Commander Root's words were "You got what you got." Rules are rules, Holly.'

Holly sighed. 'Yes, Foaly. Rules are rules. Julius knows best.'

'That's right. Julius knows best,' said Foaly, but he didn't sound convinced.

'You probably couldn't help anyway. Spiro's security is pretty advanced.'

Foaly snorted, and a centaur snorting is something to hear.

'Yeah, sure. What has he got? A couple of tin cans and a dog? Ooh scary.'

'I wish. There's stuff in this building that I've never seen before. Smart stuff.'

A small liquid-crystal screen flickered into life in the corner of Holly's visor. Foaly was broadcasting a visual from Police Plaza. Technically, not something he should be doing for an unofficial operation. The centaur was curious.

'I know what you're doing by the way,' said Foaly, wagging a finger.

'I have no idea what you mean,' said Holly innocently.

'*You probably couldn't help anyway. Spiro's security is pretty advanced,*' mimicked the centaur. 'You're trying to light a fire under my ego. I'm not stupid, Holly.'

'OK. Maybe I am. Do you want the straight truth?'

'Oh, you're going to tell me the truth now? Interesting tactic for the LEP.'

‘The Spiro Needle is a fortress. There’s no way in without you, even Artemis admits it. We’re not looking for equipment, or extra fairy-power. Just advice over the airwaves, maybe a bit of camera work. Keep the lines open, that’s all I’m asking.’

Foaly scratched his chin. ‘No way in, eh? Even Artemis admits it.’

‘‘We can’t do it without Foaly.’’ His exact words.’

The centaur struggled to keep the smugness from his features.

‘Have you got any video?’

Holly took a hand-held computer from her belt.

‘Artemis shot some film inside the Needle. I’m mailing it to you now.’

‘I need a blueprint of the building.’

Holly panned her visor left and right, so Foaly could see where she was.

‘That’s why I’m up here. To do an X-ray scan. It’ll be in your mainframe in ten minutes.’

Holly heard a bell chime in her speakers. It was a computer alert. Her mail had arrived in Police Plaza. Foaly opened the file.

‘Key codes. OK. Cameras. No problem. Wait until I show you what I’ve developed for CCTV cameras. I’m fast-forwarding through the corridors. Dum de dum de dum. Ah, the vault. On the eighty-fifth. Pressure pads, antibiotic mats. Motion sensors. Temperature sensitive lasers. Thermal cameras. Voice-recognition, retina and gel-thumbprint scanners.’ He paused. ‘Impressive, for a Mud Man.’

‘You’re telling me,’ agreed Holly. ‘A bit more than two tin cans and a dog.’

‘Fowl is right. Without me you’re sunk.’

‘So, will you help?’

Foaly had to milk the moment. ‘I’m not promising anything, mind...’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ll keep a screen open for you. But if something comes up...’

‘I understand.’

‘No guarantees.’

‘No guarantees. I owe you a carton of carrots.’

‘Two cartons. And a case of beetle juice.’

‘Done.’

The centaur’s face was flushed with the promise of a challenge.

‘Will you miss him, Holly?’ he asked suddenly.

Holly was caught off-guard by the question.

‘Miss who?’ she said, though she already knew.

‘The Fowl boy, of course. If everything goes according to plan, we’ll be wiped from his memory. No more wild plots or seat-of-the-pants adventures. It will be a quiet life.’

Holly made to avoid Foaly’s gaze, although the helmet cam was point-of-view and the centaur could not see her.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I will not miss him.’

But her eyes told the real story.

Holly circled the Needle several times at various altitudes, until the X-ray scanner had accumulated enough data for a 3D model. She mailed a copy of the file to Foaly in Police Plaza and returned to the van.

‘I thought I told you not to mark them,’ she said, bending over the fallen hit men.

Juliet shrugged. ‘Hey. No big deal, fairy girl. I got carried away in the heat of battle. Just give him a shot of blue sparks and send him on his way.’

Holly traced a finger round the perfectly circular bruise on Chips’s forehead.

‘You should have seen me,’ said Juliet. ‘Bang, bang, and they were down. Never had a chance.’

Holly sent a solitary spark down her finger; it wiped away the bruise like a damp cloth cleaning a coffee ring.

‘You could have used the Neutrino to stun them, you know.’

‘The Neutrino? Where’s the fun in that?’

Captain Short removed her helmet, glaring up at the teenage human.

‘This is not supposed to be fun, Juliet. It’s not a game. I thought you realized that, considering what happened to Butler.’

Juliet’s grin disappeared. ‘I know it’s not a game, Captain. Maybe this is the way I deal with things.’

Holly held her gaze. ‘Well then, maybe you’re in the wrong line of work.’

‘Or maybe you’ve been in this line of work too long,’ argued Juliet. ‘According to Butler, you used to be a bit of a wild card yourself.’

Mulch emerged from the bathroom. This time he had been applying a layer of sunblock. It was now the middle of the night, but the dwarf wasn’t taking any chances. If this insertion went pear-shaped, as it probably would, then he could very well be on the run by morning.

‘What’s the problem, ladies? If you’re fighting over me, don’t bother. I make it a point never to date outside my species.’

The tension deflated like a punctured balloon.

‘Dream on, hairball,’ said Holly.

‘Nightmare, more like,’ added Juliet. ‘I make it a point never to date anyone who lives in a dung heap.’

Mulch was unperturbed. ‘You’re both in denial. I have that effect on females.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said Holly, grinning.

The LEP captain folded out a stowaway table and placed her helmet on top. She switched her helmet cam to Project, and opened the 3D plan of the Spiro Needle. It revolved in the air, a lattice of neon-green lines.

‘OK, everyone. Here’s the plan. Team One burns their way in through the wall of the eighty-fifth floor. Team Two goes in through the helipad door. Here.’

Holly marked the entrances by tapping the corresponding spot on the screen of her hand-held computer. An orange pulse appeared on

the floating plan.

‘Foaly has agreed to help, so he’ll be with us over the airwaves. Juliet, you take this hand-held computer. You can use it to conference with us on the move. Just ignore the Gnommish symbols; we’ll send you any files you need to view. Wear an earpiece though, to cut out the speakers. The last thing we need is computers beeping at the wrong moment. That little indent below the screen is a mike. Whisper-sensitive, so no need to shout.’

Juliet strapped the credit-card-sized computer on to her wrist.

‘What are the teams, and what are their objectives?’

Holly stepped into the 3D image. Her body was surrounded by strobes of light.

‘Team One goes after the security and switches the vault guards’ oxygen canisters. Team Two goes after the box. Simple. We go in pairs. You and Mulch. Artemis and me.’

‘Oh no,’ said Juliet, shaking her head. ‘I have to go with Artemis. He’s my principal. My brother would stick to Artemis like glue, and so will I.’

Holly stepped out of the hologram. ‘Won’t work. You can’t fly and you can’t climb walls. There has to be one fairy per team. If you don’t like it, take it up with Artemis next time you see him.’

Juliet scowled. It made sense. Of course it did. Artemis’s plans always made sense. It was only too clear now why Artemis had not revealed the entire thing in Ireland. He knew she would object. It was bad enough being separated for the past six hours. But the most difficult phase of the mission lay ahead, and Artemis would not have a Butler at his shoulder.

Holly stepped back into the hologram. ‘Team One, you and Mulch, climb the Needle and burn through on the eighty-fifth floor. From there, you place this video clip on a CCTV cable.’

Holly held up what looked like a twist of wire. ‘Loaded fibre optic,’ she explained. ‘Allows for remote hijacking of any video system. With this in place, Foaly can send the signal from every camera in the

building to our helmets. He can also send the humans any signal he wants them to see. You will also replace two oxygen cylinders with our own special mix.'

Juliet placed the video clip in her jacket pocket.

'I will enter from the roof,' continued Holly. 'From there, I proceed to Artemis's room. As soon as Team One gives us the all clear, we'll go after the C Cube.'

'You make it sound so easy,' said Juliet.

Mulch laughed. 'She always does that,' he said. 'And it never is.'

TEAM ONE, THE SPIRO NEEDLE'S BASE

Juliet Butler had been trained in seven martial arts disciplines. She had learned to ignore pain and sleep deprivation. She could resist torture both physical and psychological. But nothing had prepared her for what she would have to endure to get into this building.

The Needle had no blind sides, with twenty-four-hour activity on each face, so they were forced to begin their ascent from the pavement. Juliet pulled the van round, double-parking it as close to the wall as she could.

They went out through the sunroof, draped in Holly's single sheet of camouflage foil. Juliet was clipped on to the Moonbelt on Mulch's waist.

She rapped on Mulch's helmet. 'You stink.'

Mulch's reply came through the cylindrical transmitter in Juliet's ear.

'To you, maybe, but to a dwarf female I am the essence of a healthy male. You're the one that stinks, Mud Girl. To me, you smell worse than a skunk in two-month-old socks.'

Holly stuck her head through the sunroof.

'Quiet!' she hissed. 'Both of you! We're on a tight schedule in case you'd forgotten. Juliet, your precious principal is stuck in a room up there waiting for me to show up. It's five minutes past four already.'

The guards are due to change in less than an hour, and I still have to finish mesmerizing these goons. We have a fifty-five-minute window here. Let's not waste it arguing.'

'Why can't you just fly us up to the ledge?'

'Basic military tactics. If we split up, then one team might make it. If we're together, then one goes down we all go down. Divide and conquer.'

Her words sobered Juliet. The fairy girl was right; she should have known that. It was happening again – she was losing concentration at a vital moment.

'OK. Let's go. I'll hold my breath.'

Mulch stuck both palms in his mouth, sucking any last vestiges of moisture from the pores.

'Hold on,' he said, having removed his hands from his palate. 'Here we go.'

The dwarf flexed his powerful legs, leaping one and a half metres to the wall of the Spiro Needle. Juliet bobbed along behind, feeling for all the world as though she were underwater. The problem with riding a Moonbelt was that, as well as the weightlessness, you got the loss of coordination and sometimes the space nausea too. Moonbelts were designed for carrying inanimate objects, not live fairies, and certainly not human beings.

Mulch had not had a drink for several hours, causing his dwarf pores to open to the size of pinholes. They sucked noisily, latching on to the smooth external surface of the Spiro Needle. The dwarf avoided the tinted windows, sticking to the metal girders, because, even though the pair were draped in a sheet of camouflage foil, there were still enough limbs sticking out to be spotted. Cam foil did not render the wearer completely invisible. Thousands of micro-sensors, threaded through the material, analysed and reflected the surroundings, but one shower of rain could short out the whole thing.

Mulch climbed quickly, settling into a smooth rhythm. His double-jointed fingers and toes curled to grip the smallest groove. And where there were no grooves, the dwarf's pores adhered to the flat surface.

His beard hair fanned out under the helmet's visor, probing the building's face.

Juliet had to ask. 'Your beard? That's a bit freaky. What's it doing? Searching for cracks?'

'Vibrations,' grunted Mulch. 'Sensors, currents, maintenance men.' Obviously, he wasn't going to devote any energy to full sentences. 'Motion sensor picks us up. We're finished. Foil or not.'

Juliet didn't blame her partner for saving his breath. They had a long way to go. Straight up.

As they cleared the buffer provided by the adjacent buildings the wind picked up. Juliet's feet were plucked from beneath her, and she fluttered from the dwarf's neck like a scarf. Rarely had she felt so helpless. Events were utterly beyond her control. Training counted for absolutely nothing in this situation. Her life was in Mulch's hands completely.

The floors slid by in a blur of glass and steel. The wind pulled at them with grabby fingers, threatening to spin the pair into the night.

'There's a lot of moisture up here from the wind,' gasped the dwarf. 'I can't hold on much longer.'

Juliet reached in, running a finger along the outer wall. It was slick with tiny beads of dew. Sparks were popping along the sheet of cam foil as the moisture-laden wind shorted out its micro-sensors. Patches of the foil failed altogether. The effect was of blocks of circuits apparently suspended in the night. The entire building was swaying too – maybe just enough to shake off a tired dwarf and his passenger.

Finally, the dwarf's fingers locked on to the ledge of the eighty-fifth floor. Mulch climbed on to the narrow outcrop, directing his visor into the building.

'This room is no good,' he said. 'My visor is picking up two motion detectors and a laser sensor. We need to move along.'

He scampered down the ledge, sure-footed as a mountain goat. This was his business, after all. Dwarfs did not fall off things. Not unless they were pushed. Juliet followed cautiously. Not even Madame Ko's

Academy could have prepared her for this.

Finally Mulch arrived at a window that satisfied him.

‘OK,’ he said, his voice sounding strained in Juliet’s earpiece. ‘We got a sensor with a dead battery.’

His beard hair latched on to the windowpane. ‘I don’t feel any vibration, so nothing electrical running and no conversation. It seems safe.’

Mulch trickled a few drops of dwarf rock polish on to the toughened pane. It liquefied the glass immediately, leaving a puddle of turgid fluid on the carpet. With any luck the hole would remain undiscovered over the weekend.

‘Ooh,’ said Juliet. ‘That stinks nearly as much as you do.’

Mulch did not bother returning the insult, preferring instead to tumble indoors to safety.

He checked the moonometer in his visor.

‘Four twenty. Human time. We’re behind schedule. Let’s go.’

Juliet hopped through the hole in the window.

‘Typical Mud Man,’ said Mulch. ‘Spiro spends millions on a security system, and it all falls apart because of one battery.’

Juliet drew an LEP Neutrino 2000. She flicked aside the safety cap and pressed the power button. The light changed from green to red.

‘We’re not in yet,’ she said, making for the door.

‘Wait!’ hissed Mulch, grabbing her arm. ‘The camera!’

Juliet froze. She’d forgotten the camera. They were barely a minute inside the building and she was already making mistakes. Concentrate, girl, concentrate.

Mulch aimed his visor at the recessed CCTV camera. The helmet’s ion filter highlighted the camera’s arc as a shimmering gold stream. There was no way past to the camera itself.

‘There’s no blind spot,’ he said. ‘And the camera cable is behind the box.’

‘We’ll just have to huddle close together behind the cam foil,’ said

Juliet, her lip curling at the idea.

Foaly's image popped up on the computer screen on her wrist. 'You could do that. But unfortunately cam foil doesn't work on-screen.'

'Why not?'

'Cameras have better eyes than humans. Did you ever see a TV picture on television? The camera breaks down the pixels. If you go down that corridor behind cam foil, you're going to look like two people behind a projector screen.'

Juliet glared at the monitor. 'Anything else, Foaly? Maybe the floor is going to dissolve into a pool of acid?'

'Doubt it. Spiro is good, but he's not me.'

'Can't you loop the video feed, pony boy?' said Juliet into the computer's mike. 'Just send them a false signal for a minute?'

Foaly gnashed his horsey teeth. 'I am so unappreciated. No, I cannot set up a loop unless I am on-site, as I was during the Fowl siege. That is what the video clip is for. I'm afraid you're on your own up there.'

'I'll blast it then.'

'Negatori. A Neutrino blast would certainly knock out one camera, and possibly chain-react along the entire network. You may as well dance a jig for Arno Blunt.'

Juliet kicked the skirting board in frustration. She was falling at the first hurdle. Her brother would know what to do, but he was on the other side of the Atlantic. A mere six metres of corridor separated them from the camera, but it might as well have been a thousand metres of broken glass.

She noticed that Mulch was unbuttoning his bum-flap.

'Oh, great. Now the little man needs a potty break. This is hardly the time.'

'I'm going to ignore your sarcasm,' said Mulch, lying flat on the floor, 'because I know what Spiro can do to people he doesn't like.'

Juliet knelt beside him. Not too close.

'I hope your next sentence is going to begin with "I have a plan."'

The dwarf appeared to be aiming his rear end.

‘Actually...’

‘You’re not serious.’

‘Deadly. I have quite a considerable force at my disposal here.’

Juliet couldn’t help smiling. The little guy was a dwarf after her own heart. Metaphorically. He was adapting to the situation, just as she would.

‘All we have to do is swing the camera about twenty degrees on its stand and we have a clear run to the cable.’

‘And you’re going to do that with... wind power?’

‘Precisely.’

‘What about the noise?’

Mulch winked. ‘Silent, but deadly. I’m a professional. All you have to do is squeeze my little toe when I give you the word.’

In spite of arduous training in some of the world’s toughest terrain, Juliet was not quite prepared to be involved in a wind offensive.

‘Do I have to participate? It seems like a one-man operation to me.’

Mulch squinted at the target, adjusting his posterior accordingly.

‘This is a precision burst. I need a gunner to pull the trigger so I can concentrate on aiming. Reflexology is a proven science with dwarfs. Every part of the foot is connected to a part of the body. And it just so happens that the left little toe is connected to my...’

‘OK,’ said Juliet hurriedly. ‘I get the picture.’

‘Let’s get on with it then.’

Juliet pulled Mulch’s boot off. The socks were open-toed, and five hairy digits wiggled with a dexterity no human toes possessed.

‘This is the only way?’

‘Unless you have a better idea.’

Juliet gingerly grasped the toe, its black curly hairs obligingly parting to allow her access to the joint.

‘Now?’

‘Wait.’ The dwarf licked his forefinger, testing the air. ‘No wind.’

‘Not yet,’ muttered Juliet.

Mulch fine-tuned his aim. ‘OK. Squeeze.’

Juliet held her breath, and squeezed. And in order to do the moment justice, it has to be described in slow motion.

Juliet felt her fingers close round the joint. The pressure sped up Mulch’s leg in a series of jolts. The dwarf fought to keep his aim true, in spite of the spasms. Pressure built in his abdomen and exploded through his bum-flap with a dull thump. The only thing Juliet could relate the experience to was crouching beside a mortar. A missile of compressed air shot across the room, heat blur surrounding it like waves of water.

‘Too much top-spin,’ groaned Mulch. ‘I loaded it.’

The air ball spiralled towards the ceiling, shedding layers like an onion.

‘Right,’ urged Mulch. ‘Right a bit.’

The next unlikely missile impacted against the wall a metre ahead of its target. Luckily, the ricochet clipped the camera box, sending it spinning like a plate on a stick. The intruders waited for it to settle with bated breath. The camera finally creaked to a halt after a dozen revolutions.

‘Well?’ asked Juliet.

Mulch sat up, checking the camera’s ion stream through his visor.

‘Lucky,’ he breathed. ‘Very lucky. We have a path straight through.’ He slapped shut his smoking bum-flap. ‘It’s been a while since I launched a torpedo.’

Juliet took the video clip from her pocket, waving it in front of her wrist computer so Foaly could see it.

‘So, I just wind this round any old cable? Is that it?’

‘No, Mud Maid,’ sighed Foaly, comfortable in his familiar role as unappreciated genius. ‘That is a complex piece of nanotechnology, complete with microfilaments that act as receivers, broadcasters and clamps. Naturally it leeches its power from the Mud People’s own system.’

‘Naturally,’ said Mulch, trying to keep his eyes open.

‘You need to ensure that it is firmly clamped to one of the video cables. Luckily, its multi-sensor does not have to be in contact with all the wires, just one.’

‘And which ones are the video wires?’

‘Well... all of them.’

Juliet groaned. ‘So I just wind it round any old cable?’

‘I suppose so,’ admitted the centaur. ‘But wind it tightly. All the filaments have to penetrate.’

Juliet reached up, selected a wire at random and wound the clip round it.

‘OK?’

There was a moment’s pause while Foaly waited for reception. Below the surface, picture-in-picture screens began popping up on the centaur’s plasma screen.

‘Perfect. We have eyes and ears.’

‘Let’s go then,’ said Juliet impatiently. ‘Start the loop.’

Foaly wasted a minute delivering another lecture. ‘This is much more than a loop, young lady. I am about to completely wipe moving patterns from the surveillance footage. In other words, the pictures they see in the surveillance booth will be exactly as they should be, except you won’t be in them. Just be careful never to stand still or you’ll become visible. Keep something moving, even if it’s only your little finger.’

Juliet checked the digital clock on the computer face. ‘Four thirty. We need to hurry.’

‘OK. The security centre is one corridor over. We take the shortest route.’

Juliet projected the schematic into the air. ‘Down this corridor here, two rights and there we are.’

Mulch strode past her to the wall.

‘I said the shortest route, Mud Girl. Think laterally.’

The office was an executive suite, with a skyline view and floor-to-ceiling pine shelving. Mulch hauled back a section of the pine and knocked on the wall behind it.

‘Plasterboard,’ he said. ‘No problem.’

Juliet closed the panel behind them. ‘No debris, dwarf. Artemis said we weren’t to leave any trace.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m not a messy eater.’

Mulch unhinged his jaw, expanding his oral cavity to basketball proportions. He opened his mouth to an incredible one hundred and seventy degrees, and took a whopping bite out of the wall. A ring of tombstone teeth soon reduced the wall to dust.

‘A bi’ dry,’ he commented. ‘Har’ oo shwallow.’

Three bites later they were through. Mulch climbed into the next office without a crumb dropping from his lips. Juliet followed, pulling the pine shelving across to cover the hole.

The next office was not quite so salubrious, the dark cubby of a vice president. No city view, and plain metal shelving. Juliet rearranged the shelving to cover the newly excavated entrance. Mulch knelt at the door, his beard hair latching on to the wood.

‘Some vibration outside. That’s probably the compressor. Nothing irregular, so no conversation. I’d say we were safe.’

‘You could just ask me,’ said Foaly, in his helmet earpiece. ‘I do have footage from every camera in the building. That’s over two thousand, in case you’re interested.’

‘Thanks for the update. Well, are we clear?’

‘Yes. Remarkably so. No one in the immediate vicinity, except a guard at the lobby desk.’

Juliet took two grey canisters from her backpack. ‘OK. This is where I earn my keep. You stay here. This shouldn’t take more than a minute.’

Juliet cracked open the door, creeping along the corridor on rubber-soled boots. Aeroplane-style lighting strips were inlaid in the carpet; otherwise, the only lighting came from exit boxes over the

fire-escape doors.

The schematic on her wrist computer told her that she had twenty metres to go before reaching the security office. After that, she could only hope that the oxygen rack was unlocked. And why shouldn't it be? Oxygen canisters were hardly high-risk objects. At least she would have ample warning if any personnel happened to be doing their rounds.

Juliet crept, panther-like, down the corridor, her footfalls muffled by the carpet. On reaching the final corner she lay flat and inched her nose round the bend. She could see the floor's security station. Just as Pex had revealed under the *mesmer*, the vault guard's oxygen canisters were slotted in a rack in front of the desk.

There was only one guard on duty, and he was busy watching basketball on a portable television. Juliet moved forward on her stomach until she was directly below the rack. The guard had his back to her, concentrating on the game.

'What the hell?' exclaimed the security man, who was roughly the size of a refrigerator. He had noticed something in a security monitor.

'Move!' hissed Foaly in Juliet's earpiece.

'What?'

'Move! You're showing up on the monitors.'

Juliet wiggled her toe. She had forgotten to keep moving. Butler would never have forgotten that.

Over her head, the guard employed the age-old method of rapid repair, slapping the monitor's plastic casing. The fuzzy figure disappeared.

'Interference,' he muttered. 'Stupid satellite TV.'

Juliet felt a bead of sweat run along the bridge of her nose. The younger Butler reached up slowly and slipped two substitute oxygen canisters into the rack. Although 'oxygen canisters' was a bit of a misnomer, because it wasn't oxygen in these canisters.

She checked her watch. It might already be too late.

TEAM TWO, ABOVE THE SPIRO NEEDLE

Holly hovered six metres above the Needle, waiting for the green light. She was not comfortable with this operation. There were too many variables. If this mission weren't so vital to the future of the fairy civilization, she would have refused to participate in it altogether.

Her mood did not improve as the night progressed. Team One was proving extremely unprofessional, bickering like a pair of adolescents. Although, to be fair to Juliet, she was barely beyond adolescence. Mulch, on the other hand, couldn't find his childhood with an encyclopaedia.

Captain Short followed their progress on her helmet visor, wincing at each new development. Finally, and against all the odds, Juliet managed to switch the canisters.

'Go,' said Mulch, doing his best to sound military. 'I say again, we have a go situation on the black op. code red thing.'

Holly shut off Mulch's communication in the middle of the dwarf's giggling fit. Foaly could open a screen in her visor if there was a crisis.

Below her the Spiro Needle pointed spacewards like the world's biggest rocket. Low fog gathered around its base, adding to the illusion. Holly set her wings to descend, dropping gently towards the helipad. She called up the video file of Artemis's entry to the Needle on her visor and slowed it down at the point where Spiro keyed in the access code for the rooftop door.

'Thank you, Spiro,' she said, grinning, as she punched in the code.

The door slid open pneumatically. Automatic lights flickered into life along the stairwell. There was a camera every six metres. No blind spots. This didn't matter to Holly, as human cameras could not detect a shielded fairy – unless they were of the type with an extremely high frame-per-second rate. And even then, the frames had to be viewed as stills to catch a glimpse of the fairy folk. Only one human had ever managed to do this. An Irish one, who was twelve

years old at the time.

Holly floated down the stairwell, activating an Argon laser filter on her visor. This entire building could be crisscrossed with laser beams and she wouldn't know it until she set off an alarm. Even a shielded fairy had mass enough to stop a beam reaching its sensor, if only for a millisecond. The view before her turned a cloudy purple, but there were no beams. She was certain that wouldn't be the case when they came to the vault.

Holly continued her flight to the brushed-steel lift doors.

'Artemis is on eighty-four,' said Foaly. 'The vault is on eighty-five; Spiro's penthouse is on eighty-six, where we are now.'

'How are the walls?'

'According to the spectrometer, mostly plaster and wood in the partition walls. Except round key rooms, which are reinforced steel.'

'Let me guess: Artemis's room, the vault and Spiro's penthouse.'

'Dead on, Captain. But do not despair. I have plotted the shortest course. I am sending it to your helmet now.'

Holly waited a moment until a quill icon flashed in the corner of her visor, informing her that she had mail.

'Open mail,' she said into the helmet mike, enunciating clearly. A matrix of green lines superimposed themselves in front of her regular vision. Her trail was marked by a thick red line.

'Follow the laser, Holly. Foolproof. No offence.'

'None taken, for now. But if this doesn't work, I'll be so offended you won't believe it.'

The red laser led straight into the belly of the lift. Holly floated into the metal box and descended to the eighty-fifth floor. The guiding laser led her out of the lift and down the corridor.

She tried the door to an office on her left. Locked. Hardly surprising.

'I'm going to have to unshield to pick this lock. Are you sure my pattern is wiped from the video?'

'Of course,' said Foaly.

Holly could imagine the childish pout on his lips. She unshielded and took an Omnitool from her belt. The Omnitool's sensor would send an X-ray of the lock's workings to the chip and select the right bit. It even did the turning. Of course, the Omnitool only worked on keyhole locks, which, in spite of their unreliability, the Mud People still used.

In less than five seconds the door lay open before her.

'Five seconds,' said Holly. 'This thing needs a new battery.'

The red line in her visor ran to the office's centre, and then took a right-angle turn downwards, through the floor.

'Let me guess. Artemis is down there?'

'Yes. Asleep, judging by the pictures coming in from his iris-cam.'

'You said the cell was lined with reinforced steel.'

'True. But no motion sensors in the walls or roof. So all you have to do is burn through.'

Holly drew her Neutrino 2000. 'Oh, is that all?'

She chose a spot adjacent to a wall air conditioner and peeled back the carpet. Underneath, the floor was dull and metallic.

'No trace, remember?' said Foaly in her earpiece. 'That's vital.'

'I'll worry about that later,' said Holly, adjusting the air con to extract. 'For now, I need to get him out of there. We're on a schedule.'

Holly adjusted the Neutrino's output, concentrating the beam so it cut through the metal floor. Acrid smoke billowed from the molten gash, and was immediately siphoned off into the Chicago night by the air con.

'Artemis isn't the only one with brains around here,' grunted Holly, sweat streaming down her face in spite of the helmet's climate control.

'The air con stops the fire alarm going off. Very good.'

'Is he awake?' asked Holly, leaving the last centimetre of a half-metre square uncut.

'Wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, to use Centaurian imagery. A laser

carving through the ceiling will do that to a person.'

'Good,' said Captain Short, cutting through the final section. The metal square twisted on a final strand of steel.

'Won't that make a lot of noise?' asked Foaly.

Holly watched the section fall.

'I doubt it,' she said.

CHAPTER 10: FINGERS AND THUMBS

ARTEMIS FOWL'S CELL, THE SPIRO NEEDLE



ARTEMIS was meditating when the first laser-stroke cut through the ceiling. He rose from the lotus position, pulled his sweater back on and arranged some pillows on the floor. Moments later, a square of metal fell to the floor, its impact silenced by the cushions. Holly's face appeared in the hole.

Artemis pointed at the pillows. 'You anticipated me.'

The LEP captain nodded. 'Only thirteen, and already predictable.'

'I presume you used the air conditioner to vacuum the smoke?'

'Exactly. I think we're getting to know one another too well.'

Holly reeled a piton line from her belt, lowering it into the room.

'Make a loop at the bottom with the clamp and hop aboard. I'll reel you in.'

Artemis did as he was told and, in seconds, he was clambering through the hole.

'Do we have Mister Foaly on our side?' he asked.

Holly handed Artemis a small cylindrical earpiece. 'Ask him yourself.'

Artemis inserted the miracle of nanotechnology.

'Well, Foaly. Astound me.'

Below, in Haven City, the centaur rubbed his hands together. Artemis was the only one who actually understood his lectures.

‘You’re going to love this, Mud Boy. Not only have I wiped you from the video, not only did I erase the ceiling falling in, but I have created a simulated Artemis.’

Artemis was intrigued. ‘A sim? Really? How exactly did you do that?’

‘Simple really,’ said Foaly modestly. ‘I have hundreds of human movies on file. I borrowed Steve McQueen’s solitary confinement scene from *The Great Escape* and altered his clothes.’

‘What about the face?’

‘I had some digital interrogation footage from your last visit to Haven. I put the two together and *voilà*. Our simulated Artemis can do whatever I tell him, whenever I say. At the moment, the sim is asleep, but in half an hour I may just instruct him to go to the bathroom.’

Holly reeled in her piton cord. ‘The miracle of modern science. The LEP pours millions into your department, Foaly, and all you can do is send Mud Boys to the toilet.’

‘You should be nice to me, Holly. I’m doing you a big favour. If Julius knew I was helping you, he’d be extremely angry.’

‘Which is exactly why you are doing it.’

Holly moved quietly to the door, opening it a crack. The corridor was clear and silent, but for the drone of panning cameras and the hum of fluorescent lighting. One section of Holly’s visor displayed miniature transparent feeds from Spiro’s security cameras. There were six guards doing the rounds on the floor.

Holly closed the door.

‘OK. Let’s get going. We need to reach Spiro before the guards change.’

Artemis arranged the carpet over the hole in the floor. ‘Have you located his apartment?’

‘Directly above us. We need to get up there and scan his retina and thumb.’

An expression flashed across Artemis’s face. Just for a second.

‘The scans. Yes. The sooner the better.’

Holly had never seen that look on the human boy’s features before. Was it guilt? Could it be?

‘Is there something you’re not telling me?’ she demanded.

The expression vanished, to be replaced by the customary lack of emotion.

‘No, Captain Short. Nothing. And do you really think that now is the time for an interrogation?’

Holly wagged a threatening finger. ‘Artemis. If you mess with me now, in the middle of an operation, I won’t forget it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Artemis wryly. ‘I will.’

Spiro’s apartment was two floors directly above Artemis’s cell. It made sense to reinforce the same block. Unfortunately, Jon Spiro did not like the idea of anyone spying on him, so there were no cameras in his section of the building.

‘Typical,’ muttered Foaly. ‘Power-crazed megalomaniacs never like anyone to see their own dirty secrets.’

‘I think someone’s in denial,’ said Holly, focusing a tight beam from her Neutrino at the ceiling.

A section of floating ceiling melted like ice in a kettle, revealing the steel above. Molten beads of metal ate into the carpet as the laser sliced through the flooring. When the hole was of sufficient diameter Holly shut down the beam and popped her helmet camera into the space.

Nothing appeared on the screen.

‘Switching to infrared.’

A rack of suits sprang into focus. They might have been white.

‘The wardrobe. We’re in the wardrobe.’

‘Perfect,’ said Foaly. ‘Put him to sleep.’

‘He is asleep. It’s ten to five in the morning.’

‘Well, make sure he doesn’t wake up then.’

Holly replaced the camera in its groove. She plucked a silver capsule from her belt and inserted it into the hole.

Foaly supplied the commentary for Artemis.

‘The capsule is a Sleeper Deeper, in case you’re wondering.’

‘Gaseous?’

‘No. Brainwaves.’

Artemis was intrigued. ‘Go on.’

‘Basically it scans for brainwave patterns, then replicates them. Anyone in the vicinity stays in the state they’re in until the capsule dissolves.’

‘No trace?’

‘None. And no after-effects. Whatever they’re paying me, it isn’t enough.’

Holly counted off a minute on her visor clock.

‘OK. He’s out, providing he wasn’t awake when the Sleeper Deeper went in. Let’s go.’

Spiro’s bedroom was as white as his suits, except for the charred hole in the wardrobe. Holly and Artemis climbed through on to a white shag-pile carpet with whitewood slide wardrobes. They stepped through the doors into a room that glowed in the dark. Futuristic furniture – white, of course. White spotlights and white drapes.

Holly took a moment to study a painting that dominated one wall.

‘Oh, give me a break,’ she said.

The picture was in oils. Completely white. There was a brass plaque beneath. It read ‘Snow Ghost’.

Spiro lay in the centre of a huge futon, lost in the dunes of its silk sheets. Holly pulled back the covers, rolling him over on to his back. Even in sleep the man’s face was malevolent, as though his dreams were every bit as despicable as his waking thoughts.

‘Nice guy,’ said Holly, using her thumb to raise Spiro’s left eyelid. Her helmet camera scanned the eye, storing the information on chip. It would be a simple matter to project the file on to the vault’s

scanner and fool the security computer.

The thumb scan would not be so simple. Because the device was a gel scanner, the tiny sensors would be searching for the actual ridges and whorls of Spiro's thumb. A projection would not do. It had to be 3D. Artemis had come up with the idea of using a memory-latex bandage, standard issue in any LEP first-aid kit – and the same latex used to glue the mike to his throat. All they had to do was wrap Spiro's thumb in a bandage for a moment and they would have a mould of the digit. Holly spooled a bandage from her belt, tearing off a fifteen-centimetre strip.

'It won't work,' said Artemis.

Holly's heart sank. This was it. The thing that Artemis hadn't told her.

'What won't work?'

'The memory latex. It won't fool the gel scanner.'

Holly climbed off the futon. 'I don't have time for this, Artemis. We don't have time for it. The memory latex will make a perfect copy, right down to the last molecule.'

Artemis's eyes were downcast. 'A perfect model, true, but in reverse. Like a photo negative. Ridges where there should be grooves.'

'D'Arvit!' swore Holly. The Mud Boy was right. Of course he was. The scanner would read the latex as a completely different thumbprint. Her cheeks glowed red behind the visor.

'You knew this, Mud Boy. You knew it all along.'

Artemis didn't bother denying it.

'I'm amazed no one else spotted it.'

'So why lie?'

Artemis walked round to the far side of the bed, grasping Spiro's right hand.

'Because there is no way to fool the gel scanner. It has to see the real thumb.'

Holly snorted. 'What do you want me to do? Cut it off and take it

with us?’

Artemis silence was response enough.

‘What? You want me to cut off his thumb? Are you insane?’

Artemis waited patiently for the outburst to pass.

‘Listen to me, Captain. It’s only a temporary measure. The thumb can be reattached. True?’

Holly raised her palms. ‘Just shut up, Artemis. Just close your mouth. And I thought you’d changed. The commander was right. There’s no changing human nature.’

‘Four minutes,’ persisted Artemis. ‘We have four minutes to crack the vault and get back. Spiro won’t feel a thing.’

Four minutes was the textbook healing deadline. After that there were no guarantees that the thumb would take. The skin would bind, but the muscles and nerve endings could reject.

Holly felt as though her helmet were shrinking.

‘Artemis, I’ll stun you, so help me.’

‘Think, Holly. I had no choice but to lie about my plan. Would you have agreed if I had told you earlier?’

‘No. And I’m not agreeing now!’

Artemis’s face glowed as pale as the walls. ‘You have to, Captain. There is no other way.’

Holly waved Artemis aside as though he were a persistent fly and spoke into her helmet mike.

‘Foaly, are you listening to this insanity?’

‘It sounds insane, Holly, but if you don’t get this technology back, we could lose a whole lot more than a thumb.’

‘I can’t believe it. Whose side are you on, Foaly? I don’t even want to think about the legal ramifications of this.’

The centaur snickered. ‘Legal ramifications? We’re a tad beyond the court systems here, Captain. This is a secret operation. No records and no clearance. If this came out, we’d all be out of a job. A thumb here or there is not going to make any difference.’

Holly turned up the climate control in her helmet, directing a blast of cold air at her forehead.

‘Are you sure we can make it, Artemis?’

Artemis ran a few mental calculations. ‘Yes. I’m sure. And anyway, we have no option but to try.’

Holly crossed to the other side of the futon.

‘I can’t believe I’m even considering this.’ She lifted Spiro’s hand gently. He did not react, not so much as a sleep murmur. Behind his eyelids, Spiro’s eyes jittered in REM sleep.

Holly drew her weapon. Of course, in theory, it was perfectly feasible to remove a digit and then magically reattach it. There would be no harm done, and quite possibly the injection of magic would clear up a few of the liver spots on Spiro’s hand. But that wasn’t the point. This was not how magic was supposed to be used. Artemis was manipulating the People to his own ends, once again.

‘Fifteen-centimetre beam,’ said Foaly in her ear. ‘Very high frequency. We need a clean cut. And give him a shot of magic while you’re doing it. It might buy you a couple of minutes.’

For some reason, Artemis was checking behind Spiro’s ears.

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Clever.’

‘What?’ hissed Holly. ‘What now?’

Artemis stepped back. ‘Nothing important. Continue.’

A red glow reflected from Holly’s visor as a short, concentrated laser beam erupted from the nozzle of her Neutrino.

‘One cut,’ said Artemis. ‘Clean.’

Holly glared at him. ‘Don’t, Mud Boy. Not a word. Especially not advice.’

Artemis backed off. Certain battles were won by retreating.

Using her left thumb and forefinger, Holly made a circle round Spiro’s thumb. She sent a gentle pulse of magic into the human’s hand. In seconds the skin tightened, lines disappeared and muscle tone returned.

‘Filter,’ she said into her mike. ‘X-ray.’

The filter dropped and suddenly everything was transparent, including Spiro’s hand. The bones and joints were clearly visible below the skin. They only needed the print, so she would cut between the knuckles. It would be difficult enough reattaching under pressure without adding a complex joint into the equation.

Holly took a breath and held it. The Sleeper Deeper would act more effectively than any anaesthetic. Spiro would not flinch or feel the smallest jolt of discomfort. She made the cut. A smooth cut that sealed as it went. Not a drop of blood was spilt.

Artemis wrapped the thumb in a handkerchief from Spiro’s closet.

‘Nice work,’ he said. ‘Let’s go. The clock is ticking.’

Artemis and Holly climbed back down through the wardrobe to the eighty-fifth. There was almost a mile and a half of corridor on this floor and six guards patrolling it in pairs at any one time. Their routes were specially planned so that one pair could always have an eyeball-sighting of the vault door. The vault corridor was a hundred metres long and took eighty seconds to travel. At the end of that eighty seconds, the next pair of guards stepped round the corner. Luckily, two of the guards were seeing things in a different light this particular morning.

Foaly gave them their cue.

‘OK. Our boys are approaching their corner.’

‘Are you sure it’s them? These gorillas all look the same. Small heads, no necks.’

‘I’m sure. Their targets are showing up bright and clear.’

Holly had painted Pex and Chips with a stamp generally used by customs and immigration for invisible visas. The stamps glowed orange when viewed through an infrared filter.

Holly pushed Artemis out the door in front of her. ‘OK. Go. And no sarcastic comments.’

There was no need for the warning. Even Artemis Fowl was not

inclined to be sarcastic at such a dangerous stage of the operation.

He ran down the corridor straight towards the two mammoth security guards. Their jackets protruded angularly beneath their armpits. Guns, no doubt. Big ones, with lots of bullets.

‘Are you sure they’re mesmerized?’ he asked Holly, who was hovering overhead.

‘Of course. Their minds are so blank it was like writing with chalk on a board. But I could stun them if you’d prefer.’

‘No,’ panted Artemis. ‘No trace. There must be no trace.’

Pex and Chips were closer now, discussing the merits of various fictional characters.

‘Captain Hook rocks,’ said Pex. ‘He would kick Barney’s purple butt ten times out of ten.’

Chips sighed. ‘You’re missing the whole point of Barney. It’s a values thing. Butt-kicking is not the issue.’

They walked right past Artemis without seeing him. And why would they see him? Holly had mesmerized them not to notice anybody out of the ordinary on this floor, unless they were specifically pointed out to them.

The outer security booth lay before them. There were approximately forty seconds left before the next set of guards turned the corner. The unmesmerized set.

‘Just over half a minute, Holly. You know what to do.’

Holly turned up the thermo coils in her suit so they were exactly at room temperature. This would fool the lattice of lasers that criss-crossed the vault’s entrance. Next she set her wings to a gentle hover. Any more downdraughts could activate the pressure pad underfoot. She pulled herself forward, finding purchase along the wall where her helmet told her no sensors were hidden. The pressure pad trembled from the air displacement, but not enough to activate the sensor.

Artemis watched her progress impatiently.

‘Hurry, Holly. Twenty seconds.’

Holly grunted something unprintable, dragging herself to within

touching distance of the door.

‘Video File Spiro 3,’ she said, and her helmet computer ran the footage of Jon Spiro punching in the vault door code. She mimicked his actions and, inside the steel door, six reinforced pistons retracted, allowing the counterweighted door to swing wide on its hinges. All external alarms were automatically shut off. The secondary door stood firm, three red lights burning on its panel. Only three barriers left now. The gel pad, the retina scan and voice activation.

This kind of operation was too complicated for voice command. Foaly’s computers had been known to misinterpret orders, even though the centaur insisted it was fairy error. Holly ripped back the Velcro strap covering the helmet command-pad on her wrist.

First, she projected a 3D image of Spiro’s eyeball to a height of five foot six. The retina scanner sent out a revolving beam to read the virtual eyeball. Apparently satisfied, it disabled the first lock. A red light switched to green.

The next step was to call up the appropriate sound-wave file to trick the voice check. The equipment was very sophisticated, and could not be fooled by a recording. A human recording, that is. Foaly’s digital mikes made copies that were indistinguishable from the real thing. Even stink worms, whose entire bodies were covered with ears, could be attracted by a worm-mating hiss from Foaly’s recording equipment. He was currently in negotiation with a bug-collection agency for the patent.

Holly played the file through her helmet speakers. ‘Jon Spiro. I am the boss, so open up quick.’

Alarm number two disengaged. Another green light.

‘Excuse me, Captain,’ said Artemis, an undercurrent of apprehension creeping into his voice. ‘We’re almost out of time.’

He unwrapped the thumb and stepped past Holly, on to the red floor plate. Artemis pressed the thumb into the scanner. Green gel oozed into the severed digit’s whorls. The alarm display flashed green. It had worked. Of course it had. The thumb was genuine, after all.

But nothing else happened. The door did not open.

Holly punched Artemis in the shoulder.

‘Well? Are we in?’

‘Apparently not. The punching is not helping my concentration, by the way.’

Artemis glared at the console. What had he missed? Think, boy, think. Put those famed brain cells to work. He leaned closer to the secondary door, shifting his weight from his back leg. Beneath him, the red plate squeaked.

‘Of course!’ exclaimed Artemis. He grabbed Holly, hugging her close.

‘It’s not just a red marker,’ he explained hurriedly. ‘It’s weight-sensitive.’

Artemis was right. Their combined mass was close enough to Spiro’s own to hoodwink the scales. Obviously a mechanical device, a computer would never have been fooled. The secondary door slid into its groove below their feet.

Artemis handed Holly the thumb.

‘Go,’ he said. ‘Spiro’s time is running out. I’m right behind you.’

Holly took the thumb. ‘And if you’re not?’

‘Then we go to Plan B.’

Holly nodded slowly. ‘Let’s hope we don’t have to.’

‘Let’s hope.’

Artemis strode into the vault. He ignored the fortune in jewels and bearer bonds, heading straight for the Cube’s perspex prison. There were two bullish security guards blocking the way. Both men had oxygen masks strapped over their faces and were unnaturally still.

‘Excuse me, gentlemen. Would either of you mind if I borrowed Mister Spiro’s Cube?’

Neither man responded. Not so much as a flicker of an eyebrow. This was undoubtedly because of the paralytic gas in their oxygen tanks, concocted from the venom of a nest of Peruvian spiders. The

gas was similar in chemical make-up to a salve used by South-American natives as an anaesthetic.

Artemis keyed in the code, which Foaly was reciting in his ear, and the four sides of the perspex box descended into the column on silent motors, leaving the C Cube unprotected. He reached out a hand for the box...

SPIRO'S BEDROOM

Holly climbed through the wardrobe into Spiro's bedroom. The industrialist lay in the same position she had left him, his breathing regular and normal. The stopwatch on Holly's visor read 4:57 a.m. and counting. Just in time.

Holly unwrapped the thumb gingerly, aligning it with the rest of the digit. Spiro's hand felt cold and unhealthy to her touch. She used the magnification filter in her visor to zoom in on the severed thumb. As close as she could figure, the two halves were lined up.

'Heal,' she said, and the magical sparks erupted from the tips of her fingers, sinking into the two halves of Spiro's thumb. Threads of blue light stitched the dermis and epidermis together, fresh skin breaking through the old to conceal the cut. The thumb began to vibrate and bubble. Steam vented from the pores forming a mist around Spiro's hand. His arm shook violently, the shock travelling across his bony chest. Spiro's back arched until Holly thought it would snap, then the industrialist collapsed back on to the bed. Throughout the entire process, his heart never skipped a beat.

A few stray sparks skipped along Spiro's body like stones on a pond, targeting the areas behind both ears, exactly where Artemis had been looking earlier. Curious. Holly pulled back one ear to reveal a crescent-shaped scar, rapidly being erased by the magic. There was a matching scar behind the other ear.

Holly used her visor to zoom in on one of the scars.

'Foaly. What do you make of these?'

'Surgery,' replied the centaur. 'Maybe our friend Spiro got himself a

facelift. Or maybe...'

'Or maybe it's not Spiro,' completed Holly, switching to Artemis's channel. 'Artemis. It's not Spiro. It's a double. Do you hear me? Respond, Artemis.'

Artemis didn't reply. Maybe because he wouldn't; maybe because he couldn't.

THE VAULT

Artemis reached out a hand for the box, and a false wall hissed back pneumatically. Behind it stood Jon Spiro and Arno Blunt. Spiro's smile was so wide he could have swallowed a slice of watermelon.

He clapped his hands, jewellery jangling. 'Bravo, Master Fowl. Some of us didn't think you'd make it this far.'

Blunt took a hundred-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Spiro.

'Thank you very much, Arno. I hope this teaches you not to bet against the house.'

Artemis nodded thoughtfully. 'In the bedroom. That was a double.'

'Yes. Costa, my cousin. We got the same shaped head. One or two cuts and we could be peas in a pod.'

'So you set the gel scanner to accept his print.'

'For one night only. I wanted to see how far you'd get. You're an amazing kid, Arty. No one ever made it into the vault before, and you'd be amazed how many professionals have tried. There are obviously a few glitches in my system, something the security people will have to look at. How did you get in here anyway? You don't appear to have Costa with you.'

'Trade secret.'

Spiro stepped down from a low platform. 'No matter. We'll review the tapes. There are bound to be a couple of cameras you couldn't rig. One thing is for sure; you didn't do it without help. Check him for an earpiece, Arno.'

It took Blunt less than five seconds to find the earpiece. He plucked it out triumphantly, crushing the tiny cylinder beneath his boot.

Spiro sighed. 'I have no doubt, Arno, that that little electronic wonder was worth more than you will make in a lifetime. I don't know why I keep you around. I really don't.'

Blunt grimaced. This set of teeth was perspex, half-filled with blue oil. A macabre wave machine.

'Sorry, Mister Spiro.'

'You will be sorrier still, my dentally challenged friend,' said Artemis, 'because Butler is coming.'

Blunt took an involuntary step backwards.

'Don't think that mumbo jumbo is scaring me. Butler is dead. I saw him go down.'

'Go down, perhaps. But did you see him die? If I remember the sequence of events correctly, after you shot Butler, he shot you.'

Blunt touched the sutures on his temple. 'A lucky shot.'

'Lucky? Butler is a proud marksman. I wouldn't say that to his face.'

Spiro laughed delightedly. 'The kid is messing with your mind, Arno. Thirteen years old and he's playing you like a grand piano in Carnegie Hall. Get yourself a spine, man; you're supposed to be a professional.'

Blunt tried to pull himself together, but the ghost of Butler haunted his features.

Spiro plucked the C Cube from its cushion. 'This is fun, Arty. All this tough talk and repartee, but it doesn't mean anything. I win again; you've been outflanked. This has all been a game to me. Amusement. Your little operation has been most educational, if pathetic. But you gotta realize that it's over now. You're on your own, and I don't have time for any more games!'

Artemis sighed, the picture of defeat. 'All of this has been a lesson, hasn't it? Just to show me who's boss.'

'Exactly. It takes some people a while to learn. I find the smarter the enemy, the bigger the ego. You had to realize that you were no

match for me before you would do what I asked.’ Spiro placed a bony hand on the Irish boy’s shoulder. Artemis could feel the weight of his jewellery. ‘Now listen carefully, kid. I want you to unlock this Cube. No more blarney. I never met a computer nerd yet who didn’t leave himself a back door. You open this baby up now, or I’m gonna stop being amused, and, believe me, you don’t want that.’

Artemis took the red Cube in both hands, staring at its flat screen. This was the delicate phase of his plan. Spiro had to believe that once again he had outmanoeuvred Artemis Fowl.

‘Do it, Arty. Do it now.’

Artemis ran a hand across his dry lips.

‘Very well. I need a minute.’

Spiro patted his shoulder. ‘I’m a generous man. Take two.’ He nodded at Blunt. ‘Stay close, Arno. I don’t want our little friend setting any more booby traps.’

Artemis sat at the stainless-steel table, exposing the Cube’s inner workings. He quickly manipulated a complicated bunch of fibre optics, removing one strand altogether. The LEP blocker. After less than a minute he resealed the Cube.

Spiro’s eyes were wide with anticipation, and dreams of unlimited wealth danced in his brain.

‘Good news, Arty. I want good news only.’

Artemis was more subdued now, as if the reality of his situation had finally eaten through his cockiness.

‘I rebooted it. It’s working. Except...’

Spiro waved his hands. Bracelets jingled like cat bells. ‘Except! This better be an itty bitty except kinda thing.’

‘It’s nothing. Hardly worth mentioning. I had to revert to version 1.0; version 1.2 was coded strictly to my voice patterns. 1.0 is less secure, if a bit more temperamental.’

‘Temperamental. You’re a box, not my grandmother, Cube.’

‘I am not a box!’ said Foaly, the Cube’s new voice, thanks to the removed blocker. ‘I am a marvel of artificial intelligence. I live

therefore I learn.'

'See what I mean?' said Artemis weakly. The centaur was going to blow it. Spiro's suspicions must not be aroused at this stage.

Spiro glared at the Cube, as though it were an underling.

'Are you gonna give me attitude, mister?'

The Cube did not reply.

'You have to address it by name,' explained Artemis. 'Otherwise it would answer every question within hearing distance of its sensors.'

'And what is its name?'

Juliet often used the term 'duh'. Artemis would not use such colloquialisms himself, but it would be apt at this particular moment.

'Its name is Cube.'

'OK, Cube. Are you going to give me attitude?'

'I will give you whatever is in my processor's capacity to give.'

Spiro rubbed his palms with childish glee, jewellery flashing like ripples in a sunset sea.

'OK, let's try this baby out. Cube, can you tell me – are there any satellites monitoring the building?'

Foaly was silent for a moment. Artemis could imagine him calling up his Sat-track information on a screen.

'Just one at the moment, though, judging from the ion trails, this building has been hit with more rays than the *Millennium Falcon*.'

Spiro shot Artemis a glance.

'His personality chip is faulty,' explained the boy. 'That's why I discontinued him, it. We can fix that at any time.'

Spiro nodded. He didn't want his very own technological genie growing the personality of a gorilla.

'What about that group, the LEP, Cube?' he asked. 'They were monitoring me in London. Are they watching?'

'The LEP? That's a Lebanese satellite TV network,' said Foaly, following Artemis's instructions. 'Game shows mostly. Their footprint doesn't reach this far.'

‘OK, forget about them, Cube. I need to know that satellite’s serial number.’

Foaly consulted a screen.

‘Ah... Let me see. US, registered to the federal government. Number ST1147P.’

Spiro clenched both fists. ‘Yes! Correct. I happen to already have that information myself. Cube, you have passed my test.’

The billionaire danced around the laboratory, reduced to childish displays by his greed.

‘I’m telling you, Arty, this has taken years off me! I feel like putting on a tuxedo and going to the prom.’

‘Indeed.’

‘I don’t know where to start. Should I make my own money? Or should I rip off somebody else’s?’

Artemis forced a smile. ‘The world is your oyster.’

Spiro patted the Cube gently. ‘Exactly. That’s exactly what it is. And I’m going to take every pearl it has to offer.’

Pex and Chips arrived at the vault door, guns drawn.

‘Mister Spiro!’ stammered Pex. ‘Is this some kind of drill?’

Spiro laughed. ‘Oh, look. Here comes the cavalry. An eternity too late. No, this is not a drill. And I would dearly love to know how little Artemis here got past you two!’

The hired muscle stared at Artemis as though he had just appeared from nowhere. Which, for their mesmerized brains, he had.

‘We don’t know, Mister Spiro. We never saw him. Do you want us to take him outside for a little accident?’

Spiro laughed, a short nasty bark. ‘I gotta new word for you two dumb-bells. *Expendable*. You are and he isn’t, just yet. Get it? So just stand there and look dangerous, otherwise I may replace you with two shaved gorillas.’

Spiro gazed into the Cube’s screen, as though there were nobody else in the room. ‘I reckon I’ve got twenty years left in me. After that

the world can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. I don't have any family, no heirs. There's no need to build for the future. I'm going to suck this planet dry, and with this Cube I can do whatever I want to whoever I want.'

'I know the first thing I'd do,' said Pex. His eyes seemed surprised that the words were coming out of his mouth.

Spiro froze. He wasn't used to being interrupted in mid-rant.

'What would you do, dumb-bell?' he said. 'Buy yourself a booth at Merv's Rib 'n' Roast?'

'No,' said Pex. 'I'd stick it to those Phonetix guys. They've been rubbing Spiro Industries' nose in it for years.'

It was an electric moment. Not only because Pex had actually had an idea, but because it was actually a good one.

The notion lit a thoughtful spark in Spiro's eyes.

'Phonetix. My biggest competitors. I hate those guys. Nothing would give me greater satisfaction than to destroy that bunch of second-rate phone freaks. But how?'

Now it was Chips' turn. 'I hear they're working on a new top-secret communicator. Super-life battery, or something.'

Spiro did a double take. First Pex, now Chips? Next thing you knew they'd be learning to read. Nevertheless...

'Cube,' said Spiro, 'I want you to access the Phonetix database. Copy the schematics for all their projects in development.'

'No can do, boss man. Phonetix is operating on a closed system. No Internet connection whatsoever in its R & D department. I have to be on-site.'

Spiro's euphoria disappeared. He rounded on Artemis.

'What is he talking about?'

Artemis coughed, clearing his throat. 'The Cube cannot scan a closed system unless the omni-sensor is actually touching the computer or, at least, close by. Phonetix is so paranoid about hackers that the research and development lab is completely contained, buried under several floors of solid rock. They don't even have e-mail.'

I know because I've tried to hack it myself a few times.'

'But the Cube scanned the satellite, didn't it?'

'The satellite is broadcasting. And if it's broadcasting, the Cube can trace it.'

Spiro toyed with the links of his ID chain. 'So, I'd have to go to Phonetix.'

'I wouldn't recommend it,' said Artemis. 'It's a lot to risk for the sake of a personal vendetta.'

Blunt stepped forward. 'Let me go, Mister Spiro. I'll get those plans.'

Spiro chewed on a handful of vitamin supplements from a dispenser on his belt.

'It's a nice idea, Arno. Good work. But I am reluctant to hand control of the Cube over to anyone else. Who knows what temptation they might yield to? Cube, can you disable the Phonetix alarm system?'

'Can a dwarf blow a hole in his pants?'

'What was that?'

'Eh... Nothing. Technical term. You wouldn't understand it. I have already disabled the Phonetix system.'

'What about the guards, Cube? Can you disable them?'

'No problemo. I could remote-activate the internal security measure.'

'Which is?'

'Tanks of vapour inside the air vents. Sleeping gas. Illegal, by the way, according to Chicago State Law. But clever, no after-effects, untraceable. The intruder comes to in lock-up two hours later.'

Spiro cackled. 'Those paranoid Phonetix boys. Go ahead, Cube, knock 'em out.'

'Night night,' said Foaly, with a glee that seemed all too real.

'Good. Now, Cube, all that stands between us and the Phonetix blueprints is an encrypted computer.'

'Don't make me laugh. They haven't invented a unit of time short

enough to measure how long it will take me to crack the Phonetix hard disk.'

Spiro clipped the Cube on to his belt. 'You know something? I'm starting to like this guy.'

Artemis made one last sincere-sounding attempt to contain the situation. 'Mister Spiro, I really don't think that this is a good idea.'

'Of course you don't,' laughed Jon Spiro, jangling towards the door. 'That's why I'm bringing you along.'

PHONETIX RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT LABORATORIES, CHICAGO'S INDUSTRIAL SECTOR

Spiro selected a Lincoln Town Car from his extensive garage. It was a nineties model, with fake registration. He often used it as a getaway vehicle. It was old enough to be unremarkable, and even if the police did get a shot of the plates, it wouldn't lead them anywhere.

Blunt parked opposite the Phonetix R & D lab's main entrance. A security guard was visible at his desk behind the glass revolving door. Arno pulled a pair of fold-up binoculars from the glove compartment. He focused on the guard.

'Sleeping like a baby,' he announced.

Spiro clapped him on the shoulder.

'Good. We have less than two hours. Can we do it?'

'If this Cube is as good as it says it is, then we can be in and out in fifteen minutes.'

'It's a machine,' said Artemis coldly. 'Not one of your steroid-munching associates.'

Blunt glanced over his shoulder. Artemis sat in the back seat, squashed between Pex and Chips.

'You're very brave all of a sudden.'

Artemis shrugged. 'What have I got to lose? After all, things can hardly get worse.'

There was a normal door beside the revolving one. The Cube remote-activated the buzzer, admitting the band of intruders to the lobby. No alarms sounded, and no platoon of security guards came rushing to detain them.

Spiro strode down the corridor, emboldened by his new-found technological friend and the thought of finally putting Phonetix out of business. The security lift put up no more resistance to the Cube than a picket fence would to a tank, and soon Spiro and Co. were riding the eight floors down to the sunken laboratory.

‘We’re going underground,’ chortled Pex. ‘Down where the dinosaur bones are. Did you know that after a million billion years dinosaur dung turns into diamonds?’

Usually a comment like that would have been a shootable offence, but Spiro was in a good mood.

‘No, I didn’t know that, Pex. Maybe I should pay your wages in dung.’

Pex decided that it would be better for his finances if he just kept his mouth shut from then on.

The lab itself was protected by a thumbprint scanner. Not even gel. It was a simple matter for the Cube to scan the fingerprint on the plate then project it back on to the sensor. There wasn’t even a key-code back-up.

‘Easy,’ crowed Spiro. ‘I should have done this years ago.’

‘A little credit would be nice,’ said Foaly, unable to hide his pique. ‘After all, I did get us in here and disable the guards.’

Spiro held the box before him. ‘Not crushing you into scrap metal, Cube, is my way of saying thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ grumbled Foaly.

Arno Blunt checked the security monitor bank. Throughout the facility, guards lay unconscious, one with half a rye sandwich stuffed in his mouth.

‘I gotta admit it, Mister Spiro. This is beautiful. Phonetix is even gonna have to foot the bill for the sleeping gas.’

Spiro glanced towards the ceiling. Several camera lights winked red in the shadows.

‘Cube, are we gonna have to raid the video room on our way out?’

‘It ain’t gonna happen,’ said Foaly, the method actor. ‘I wiped your patterns from the video.’

Artemis was suspended by the armpits between Pex and Chips.

‘Traitor,’ he muttered. ‘I gave you life, Cube. I am your creator.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe you made me too much like you, Fowl. *aurum potestas est*. Gold is power. I’m just doing what you taught me.’

Spiro patted the Cube fondly. ‘I love this guy. He’s like the brother I never had.’

‘I thought you had a brother?’ said Chips, puzzled, which was not unusual for him.

‘OK,’ said Spiro. ‘He’s like a brother I actually like.’

The Phonetix server was located in the centre of the lab. A monolithic hard drive, with python-like cables rippling out to various workstations.

Spiro unclipped his new best friend from his belt.

‘Where do you need to be, Cube?’

‘Just pop me down on the lid of the server, and my omni-sensor will do the rest.’

Spiro complied and, in seconds, schematics were flickering across the C Cube’s tiny screen.

‘I have them,’ crowed Spiro, his hands two fists of triumph. ‘That’s the last snide e-mail with stock prices I get from these guys.’

‘Download complete,’ said Foaly smugly. ‘We have every Phonetix project for the next decade.’

Spiro cradled the Cube against his chest.

‘Beautiful. I can launch our version of the Phonetix phone before they do, make myself a few extra million before I release the Cube.’

Arno’s attention was focused on the security monitors.

‘Eh, Mister Spiro. I think we have a situation here.’

‘A situation?’ growled Spiro. ‘What does that mean? You’re not a soldier any more, Blunt. Speak English.’

The New Zealander tapped a screen as if that would change what he was seeing.

‘I mean, we have a problem. A big problem.’

Spiro grabbed Artemis by the shoulders.

‘What have you done, Fowl? Is this some kind of...?’

The accusation died before it could be completed. Spiro had noticed something.

‘Your eyes. What’s wrong with your eyes? They don’t match.’

Artemis treated him to his best vampire smile.

‘All the better to see you with, Spiro.’

In the Phonetix lobby, the sleeping security guard suddenly regained her senses. It was Juliet. She peeped out from under the brim of a borrowed cap to make sure Spiro had not left anyone in the corridor.

Following Artemis’s capture in Spiro’s vault, Holly had flown them both to Phonetix to initiate Plan B.

Of course, there had been no sleeping gas. For that matter there had only been two guards. One was taking a restroom break and the other was doing the rounds of the upper floors. Still, Spiro wasn’t to know that. He was busy watching Foaly’s family of sim security snoring all over the building, thanks to a video clip on the Phonetix system.

Juliet lifted the desk phone and dialled three numbers.

9... 1... 1

Spiro reached two fingers delicately into Artemis’s eye, plucking out the iris-cam. He studied it closely, noting the microcircuitry on the concave side.

‘This is electronic,’ he whispered. ‘Amazing. What is it?’

Artemis blinked a tear from his eye. ‘It’s nothing. It was never here. Just as I was never here.’

Spiro's face twisted in sheer hatred. 'You were here all right, Fowl, and you'll never leave here.'

Blunt tapped his employer on the shoulder. An act of unforgivable familiarity.

'Boss, Mister Spiro. You really need to see this.'

*

Juliet stripped off her Phonetix Security jacket. Underneath she wore a Chicago PD SWAT uniform. Things could get hairy in the R & D Lab, and it was her job to make sure that Artemis did not get hurt. She hid behind a pillar in the lobby and waited for the sirens.

Spiro stared at the lab's security monitors. The pictures had changed. There were no more guards slumbering around the facility. Instead, the screens played a tape of Spiro and his cronies breaking into Phonetix. With one crucial difference: there was no trace of Artemis on the screen.

'What's happening, Cube?' spluttered Spiro. 'You said that we'd all be wiped from the tapes.'

'I lied. It must be the criminal personality I'm developing.'

Spiro smashed the Cube against the floor. It remained intact.

'Tough polymer,' said Artemis, picking up the microcomputer. 'Almost unbreakable.'

'Unlike you,' retorted Spiro.

Artemis looked like a doll between Pex and Chips. 'Don't you understand yet? You're all on tape. The Cube was working for me.'

'Big deal. So we're on tape. All I have to do is pay the security booth a visit and take the recordings.'

'It's not going to be that simple.'

Spiro still believed that there was a way out.

'And why not? Who's gonna stop me? Little old you?'

Artemis pointed to the screens. 'No. Little old them.'

The Chicago PD brought everything they had, and a few things they had to borrow. Phonetix was the city's biggest single employer, not to mention one of the top five subscribers to the Police Benevolent Fund. When the 911 call came in the duty sergeant put out a city wide summons.

In less than five minutes there were twenty uniforms and a full SWAT team beating on the Phonetix doors. Two choppers hovered overhead and eight snipers lined the roofs of the adjacent buildings. No one was leaving the area, unless they were invisible.

The Phonetix security guard had returned from his rounds and just noticed the intruders on the monitors. Shortly after that he noticed a group of Chicago PD uniforms tapping the door with their gun barrels.

He buzzed them in. 'I was just about to call you guys,' he said. 'There's a buncha intruders in the vault. They musta tunnelled in or somethin', 'cause they didn't come past me.'

The security guard on a restroom break was even more surprised. He was just finishing off the sports section of the *Herald Tribune* when two very serious-looking men in body armour burst into the cubicle.

'ID?' growled one, who apparently did not have the time for full sentences.

The security guard held up his laminated card with a shaking hand.

'Stay put, sir,' advised the other police officer. He didn't have to say it twice.

Juliet slipped out from behind the pillar, joining the ranks of the SWAT team. She pointed her gun and roared with the best of them, and was instantly assimilated into the group. Their assault was cut short by a tiny problem. There was only one access-point to the lab. The lift shaft.

Two officers prised open the lift door with crowbars.

'Here's our dilemma,' said one. 'We cut the power, then we can't get the lift up here. If we call the lift up here first, then we tip off our intruders.'

Juliet shouldered herself to the front of the group.

‘Excuse me, sir. Let me go down on the cables. I blow the doors and you cut the power.’

The commander did not even consider it. ‘No. Too dangerous. The intruders would have plenty of time to put a hundred rounds into the lift. Who are you anyway?’

Juliet took a small gripper from her belt. She clipped it on to the lift cable and hopped into the shaft.

‘I’m new,’ she said, disappearing into the blackness.

*

In the laboratory, Spiro and Co. were hypnotized by the monitors. Foaly had allowed the screens to show what was actually happening on the upper levels.

‘SWAT,’ said Blunt. ‘Helicopters. Heavy armament. How did this happen?’

Spiro smacked his own forehead repeatedly.

‘A set-up. This entire thing. A set-up. I suppose Mo Digence was working for you too?’

‘Yes. Pex and Chips too, even if they didn’t know it. You would never have come here if I’d suggested it.’

‘But how? How did you do this? It’s not possible.’

Artemis glanced at the monitors. ‘Obviously it is. I knew you would be waiting for me in the Spiro Needle vault. After that, all I had to do was use your own hatred of Phonetix to lure you here, out of your environment.’

‘If I go down, so do you.’

‘Incorrect. I was never here. The tapes will prove it.’

‘But you *are* here!’ roared Spiro, his nerves shot. His whole body vibrated and spittle sprayed from his lips in a wide arc. ‘Your dead body will prove it. Give me the gun, Arno. I’m going to shoot him.’

Blunt could not hide his disappointment, but he did as he was told.

Spiro pointed the weapon with shaky hands. Pex and Chips stepped rapidly to one side. The boss was not known for his marksmanship.

‘You have taken everything from me,’ he shouted. ‘Everything.’

Artemis was strangely calm. ‘You don’t understand, Jon. It’s like I told you. I am not here.’ He paused for breath. ‘And one more thing. About my name – Artemis – you were right. In London, it is generally a female name, after the Greek goddess of archery. But every now and then a male comes along with such a talent for hunting that he earns the right to use the name. I am that male. Artemis the hunter. I hunted you.’

And just like that, he disappeared.

Holly had been hovering above Spiro and Co. all the way from the Spiro Needle to the Phonetix building. She had got permission to enter the facility minutes earlier when Juliet had called to enquire about the public tours.

Juliet had put on her best cutesy voice for the security guide.

‘Hey, mister, is it OK if I bring my invisible friend?’

‘Sure it is, honey,’ replied the guide. ‘Bring your security blanket too, if it makes you happy.’

They were in.

Holly hovered at ceiling level, following Artemis’s progress below. The Mud Boy’s plan was fraught with risk. If Spiro decided to shoot him in the Needle, then it was all over.

But no, just as Artemis predicted, Spiro had opted to gloat for as long as possible, basking in the glow of his own demented genius. But, of course, it wasn’t his own genius. It was Artemis’s. The boy had orchestrated this whole operation from beginning to end. It had even been his idea to mesmerize Pex and Chips. It was crucial that they plant the idea to invade Phonetix.

Holly was ready when the lift door opened. She had her weapon charged and targets selected. But she couldn’t go. Wait for the signal.

Artemis dragged it out. Melodramatic to the end. And then, just

when Holly was about to disregard her orders and start blasting, he spoke.

‘I am that male. Artemis the hunter. I hunted you.’

Artemis the hunter. The signal.

Holly squeezed the manual throttle on her wing rig and descended, stopping short a metre from the ground. She clipped Artemis on to a retractable cord on her Moonbelt, then dropped a sheet of cam foil in front of him. To everybody in the room, it would seem as though the boy had disappeared.

‘Up we go,’ she said, though Artemis could not hear her, and opened the throttle wide. In under a second they were nestled safely among the cables and ducts that ran along the ceiling.

Below them, Jon Spiro lost his mind.

Spiro blinked. The boy had gone! Just gone! It couldn’t be. He was Jon Spiro! Nobody outsmarted Jon Spiro!

He turned to Pex and Chips, gesticulating wildly with the gun.

‘Where is he?’

‘Huh?’ said the bodyguards, in perfect unison. Unrehearsed.

‘Where is Artemis Fowl? What did you do with him?’

‘Nothing, Mister Spiro. We were just standing here playing the shoulder game.’

‘Fowl said you were working for him. So hand him over.’

Pex’s brain was churning. This was an operation akin to a food blender mixing concrete.

‘Careful, Mister Spiro, guns are dangerous. Especially the end with the hole.’

‘This isn’t over, Artemis Fowl,’ Spiro roared at the ceiling. ‘I will find you. I will never give up. You’ve got Jon Spiro’s word on it. My word!’

He began to fire random shots, blowing holes in monitors, vents and conduits. One even came within a metre of Artemis.

Pex and Chips were not quite sure what was going on, but decided that it might be a good idea to join in the fun. They pulled out their weapons and began shooting up the lab.

Blunt did not get involved. He considered his employment contract terminated. There was no way out of this for Spiro – it was every man for himself. He crossed to the wall's metal panelling and began to dismantle it with a power screwdriver. A section dropped from its casing, behind it a five-centimetre cable space, then solid concrete. They were trapped.

Behind him, the lift door dinged.

Juliet was crouched in the lift shaft.

'We're clear,' said Holly in her earpiece. 'But Spiro is shooting up the lab.'

Juliet frowned. Her principal was in danger. 'Knock them out with the Neutrino.'

'I can't. If Spiro is unconscious when the police arrive, he could claim a frame-up.'

'OK. I'm going in.'

'Negative. Wait for SWAT.'

'No. You take out the weapons. I'll handle the rest.'

Mulch had given Juliet a bottle of dwarf rock polish. She poured a little puddle on the lift roof and it dissolved like fat on a pan. Juliet hopped into the carriage, crouching low in case Blunt decided to put a few rounds into the lift.

'On three.'

'Juliet.'

'I'm going on three.'

'OK.'

Juliet reached up to the door-open button. 'One.'

Holly drew her Neutrino, locking all four targets into her visor's targeting system.

‘Two.’ She unshielded for accuracy, the vibration would throw her aim right off. For a few seconds she would have to hide behind the foil with Artemis.

‘Three.’

Juliet pressed the button.

Holly squeezed off four shots.

Artemis had less than a minute to make his move. Less than a minute while Holly targeted and disarmed Spiro and Co. The circumstances were hardly ideal – screaming, gunfire and general mayhem. But then again, what better time to implement the final step in this stage of the plan? A very vital step.

The second Holly unshielded to fire, Artemis scrolled out a perspex keyboard from the C Cube’s base and began to type. In seconds, he had hacked into Spiro’s bank accounts – all thirty-seven of them, in institutions from the Isle of Man to the Caymans. The various account numbers locked into place. He had access to each secret fund.

The Cube quickly ran a tot on the total funds: 2.8 billion US dollars, not counting the contents of various safety deposit boxes, which could not be touched over the Net. 2.8 billion dollars. Plenty to restore the Fowl’s status as one of the top five richest Irish families.

Just as he was about to complete the transaction Artemis remembered his father’s words. His father, returned to him by the fairy folk...

‘... And what about you, Arty? Will you make the journey with me? When the moment comes will you take your chance to be a hero?...’

Did he really need billions of dollars?

Of course I need it. *aurum potestas est*. Gold is power.

Really? Will you take your chance to be a hero? To make a difference?

Because he could not groan aloud, Artemis rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth. Well, if he was going to be a hero, he would be a well paid one. He quickly deducted a ten per cent finder’s fee from

the 2.8 billion, then sent the rest to Amnesty International. He made the transaction irreversible, in case he weakened later on.

Artemis wasn't finished yet. There was one more good deed to be attended to. The success of this venture depended on Foaly being too busy watching the show to notice Artemis hacking into his system.

He brought up the LEP site and set the code breaker working on a password. It took ten valuable seconds per character, but he was soon flying around LEP micro-sites. Artemis found what he needed on Perp Profiles. Mulch Diggums's complete arrest record. From there, it was a simple matter to follow the electron trail back to the original search warrant for Mulch's dwelling. Artemis changed the date on the warrant to read the day *after* Mulch's arrest. This meant that all subsequent arrests and convictions were null and void. A good lawyer would have him out of prison in a heartbeat.

'I have not finished with you yet, Mulch Diggums,' he whispered, logging out and clipping the Cube on Holly's belt.

Juliet came through the door so fast her limbs were a blur. The jade ring trailed behind her like a fishing lure on the end of a line.

Butler would never take chances like this, she knew. He would have some perfectly practical, safe plan – which was why he had his blue diamond tattoo and she didn't. Well, maybe she didn't want a tattoo. Maybe she wanted a life of her own.

She quickly assessed the situation. Holly's aim was true. The two gorillas were rubbing their scorched hands and Spiro was stamping his feet like a spoiled child. Only Blunt was on the floor, going for his gun.

Even though the bodyguard was on his hands and knees, he was still almost at her eye level.

'Aren't you going to give me a chance to get up?' he asked.

'No,' said Juliet, whipping the jade ring around like the stone that felled Goliath. It impacted on the bridge of Blunt's nose, cracking it and effectively blinding him for a couple of minutes. Plenty of time for the Chicago Police to get down the shaft.

Blunt was now out of the game. Juliet had expected to feel some satisfaction, but all she felt was sadness. There was no joy in violence.

Pex and Chips felt they should do something. Perhaps disabling the girl would earn them a bonus from Mister Spiro? They circled Juliet, fists raised.

Juliet wagged a finger at them. 'Sorry, boys. You have to go to sleep.'

The bodyguards ignored her, tightening the radius of their circle.

'I said go to sleep.'

Still no response.

'You have to use exactly the words that I mesmerized them to respond to,' said Holly in her ear.

Juliet sighed. 'If I must. OK, gentlemen; Barney says go to sleep.'

Pex and Chips were snoring before they hit the ground.

That just left Spiro, and he was too busy gibbering to be any threat. He was still gibbering when the SWAT team put the cuffs on him.

'I'll talk to you back at base,' said the SWAT captain sternly to Juliet. 'You're a danger to your comrades and yourself.'

'Yessir,' said Juliet contritely. 'I don't know what came over me, sir.'

She glanced upwards. A slight heat haze seemed to be drifting towards the lift shaft. The principal was safe.

*

Holly holstered her weapon, buzzing up her shield.

'Time to go,' she said, the volume on her PA turned to minimum.

Holly wrapped the cam foil tightly round Artemis, making certain no limbs were peeking out. It was imperative they leave while the lift was empty. Once forensics and the press got there, even a slight shimmer in the air might be caught on film.

As they flew across the room, Spiro was being led from the lab. He had finally managed to calm down.

‘This is a set-up,’ he proclaimed in his best innocent voice. ‘My lawyers are gonna rip you guys apart.’

Artemis could not resist speaking as they floated past his ear.

‘Farewell, Jon,’ he whispered. ‘Never mess with a boy genius.’

Spiro howled at the ceiling like a demented wolf.

Mulch was waiting across the street from the Phonetix lab, revving the van like a Grand Prix driver. He sat behind the wheel on an orange crate, with a short plank taped to his foot. The other end of the plank was taped to the accelerator.

Juliet studied the system nervously. ‘Shouldn’t you untie that foot in case you need to use the brakes?’

‘Brakes?’ laughed Mulch. ‘Why would I use the brakes? I’m not doing my driving test here.’

In the back of the van, Artemis and Holly simultaneously reached for their seat belts.

handcuffed and manacled. They revised this opinion when the van was discovered six miles south of Chicago, with the officers manacled and no sign of the suspect. To quote Sergeant Iggy Lebowski's report: *'The guy ripped those handcuffs apart as though they were links in a paperchain. He came at us like a steam train. We never had a chance.'*

But Arno Blunt did not escape clean. His pride had taken a severe beating in the Spiro Needle. He knew that word of his humiliation would soon spread through the bodyguard network. As Pork Belly LaRue later put it on the Soldiers for Hire web site: *'Arno done got hisself outsmarted by some snot-nosed kid.'* Blunt was painfully aware that he would have to suffer chortles every time he walked into a room full of tough guys – unless he avenged the insult paid to him by Artemis Fowl.

The bodyguard knew that he had minutes before Spiro gave up his address to the Chicago PD, so he packed a few spare sets of teeth and took the shuttle to O' Hare International Airport.

Blunt was delighted to find that the authorities had not yet frozen his Spiro corporate credit card, and used it to purchase a first class British Airways Concorde ticket to London Heathrow. From there he would enter Ireland on the Rosslare ferry. Just another one of five hundred tourists visiting the land of the leprechaun.

It wasn't a terribly complicated plan, and it would have worked if it hadn't been for one thing: the passport official at Heathrow just happened to be Sid Commons, the ex-Green Beret who had served with Butler on bodyguard duty in Monte Carlo. The second Blunt opened his mouth alarm bells went off in Commons' head. The gentleman before him fitted the description Butler had faxed over perfectly. Right down to the strange teeth. Blue oil and water, if you don't mind. Commons pressed a button under his desk and, in seconds, a squad of security men relieved Blunt of his passport and took him into custody.

The chief security official took out his mobile phone as soon as the detainee was under lock and key. He dialled an international number. It rang twice.

‘The Fowl residence.’

‘Butler? It’s Sid Commons, in Heathrow. A man came through here you might be interested in. Funny teeth, neck tattoos, New Zealand accent. Detective Inspector Justin Barre faxed out the description from Scotland Yard a few days ago; he said you might be able to ID him.’

‘Do you still have him?’ asked the manservant.

‘Yes. He’s in one of our holding cells. They’re running a check right now.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘A couple of hours, max. But if he’s the professional you say he is, a computer check won’t turn up anything. We need a confession to turn him over to Scotland Yard.’

‘I will meet you in the Arrivals hall under the departure board in thirty minutes,’ said Butler, severing the connection.

Sid Commons stared at his mobile phone. How could Butler possibly get there in thirty minutes from Ireland? It wasn’t important. All Sid knew was that Butler had saved his life a dozen times in Monte Carlo all those years ago, and now the debt was about to be repaid.

Thirty-two minutes later, Butler showed up in the Arrivals hall.

Sid Commons studied him as they shook hands.

‘You seem different. Older.’

‘The battles are catching up with me,’ said Butler, a palm across his heaving chest. ‘Time to retire, I think.’

‘Is there any point asking how you got here?’

Butler straightened his tie. ‘Not really. You’re better off not knowing.’

‘I see.’

‘Where’s our man?’

Commons led the way towards the rear of the building, past hordes of tourists and card-bearing taxi drivers.

‘Through here. You’re not armed, are you? I know we’re friends, but I can’t allow firearms in here.’

Butler spread his jacket wide. ‘Trust me. I know the rules.’

They took a security lift up two floors, and followed a dimly lit corridor for what seemed like miles.

‘Here we are,’ said Sid eventually, pointing at a glass rectangle. ‘In there.’

The glass was actually a two-way mirror. Butler could see Arno Blunt seated at a small table, drumming his fingers impatiently on the Formica surface.

‘Is that him? Is that the man who shot you in Knightsbridge?’

Butler nodded. It was him all right. The same indolent expression. The same hands that had pulled the trigger.

‘A positive ID is something, but it’s still your word against his and, to be honest, you don’t look too shot.’

Butler laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. ‘I don’t suppose –’

Commons didn’t even let him finish. ‘No. You can not go in there. Absolutely not. I’d be out of a job, for sure; and anyway, even if you did prise a confession out of him, it would never hold up in court.’

Butler nodded. ‘I understand. Do you mind if I stay? I want to see how this turns out.’

Commons agreed eagerly, relieved that Butler hadn’t pressured him.

‘No problem. Stick around as long as you like. But I have to get you a visitor’s badge.’ He strode down the corridor, then turned.

‘Don’t go in there, Butler. If you do, we lose him forever. And anyway, there are cameras all over this place.’

Butler smiled reassuringly. Something he didn’t do very often.

‘Don’t worry, Sid. You won’t see me in that room.’

Commons sighed. ‘Good. Great. It’s just sometimes when you get that look in your eye...’

‘I’m a different man now. More mature.’

Commons laughed. 'That'll be the day.'

He rounded the corner, his chuckles lingering in the air. He was no sooner gone than Holly unshielded by Butler's leg.

'Cameras?' hissed the bodyguard from the corner of his mouth.

'I checked the ion beams. I'm clear right here.' She pulled a sheet of camouflage foil from her backpack, laying it on the floor. She then twisted a video clip around a cable tacked to the cell's outer wall.

'OK,' she said, listening to Foaly's voice in her ear. 'We're in. Foaly has wiped our patterns from the video. We are camera and mike-proof now. Do you know what to do?'

Butler nodded. They had been through this before, but Holly had a soldier's need to double-check.

'I'm going to shield again. Give me a second to move, then put the foil on and do your thing. I give you two minutes, tops, before your friend returns. After that you're on your own.'

'Understood.'

'Good luck,' said Holly, shimmering out of the visible spectrum.

Butler waited a beat, then took two steps to the left. He picked up the foil and draped it over his head and shoulders. To the casual passerby, he was now invisible. But if anyone paused on his or her way down the corridor, something of the manservant's bulk was bound to be poking out from under the foil. Best to move quickly. He slid the latch on the cell door across and stepped inside.

Arno Blunt was not unduly worried. This was a bum rap. How long could you be held for having novelty false teeth, for heaven's sake? Not much longer, that was for sure. Maybe he would sue the British government for trauma, and retire home to New Zealand.

The door swung open thirty centimetres, then closed again. Blunt sighed. It was an old interrogator's trick. Let the prisoner sweat for a few hours, then open the door to make him think help was on the way. When no one entered the prisoner would be plunged into even deeper despair. Ever closer to breaking point.

‘Arno Blunt,’ sighed a voice from nowhere.

Blunt stopped drumming his fingers and sat up straight.

‘What is this?’ he sneered. ‘Are there speakers in here? That’s lame, guys. Really lame.’

‘I’ve come for you,’ said the voice. ‘I’ve come to even the score.’

Arno Blunt knew that voice. He’d been dreaming about it since Chicago, ever since the Irish kid had warned him Butler would return. OK, it was ridiculous; there were no such things as ghosts. But there was something about Artemis Fowl’s stare that made you believe everything he told you.

‘Butler? Is that you?’

‘Ah,’ said the voice. ‘You remember me.’

Arno took a deep, shuddering breath. Composing himself.

‘I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m not falling for it. What? I’m supposed to cry like a baby now, because you found somebody who sounds like one of my... Somebody I knew?’

‘This is no trick, Arno. I’m right here.’

‘Sure. If you’re right there, why can’t I see you?’

‘Are you sure you can’t see me, Arno? Look closely.’

Blunt’s stare hopped wildly around the room. There was no one else in there. No one. He was certain of it. But there was a patch of air in the corner of the room that seemed to be bending light, like a floating mirror.

‘Ah, you’ve spotted me.’

‘I’ve spotted nothing,’ said Blunt shakily. ‘All I see is a heat blur. Maybe from a vent or something.’

‘Oh, really?’ said Butler, throwing off the cam foil. To Blunt it seemed as though he had stepped from the air. The bodyguard stood abruptly, catapulting his chair against the wall.

‘Oh, God! What are you?’

Butler bent his knees slightly. Ready for action. He was older now, true. And slower. But the fairy magic had bolstered his reaction time,

and he had so much more experience than Blunt. Juliet would have liked to handle this job for him, but there were some things you had to finish personally.

‘I am your guide, Arno. I’ve come to take you home. There are a lot of people waiting to see you.’

‘H-h-home?’ stammered Blunt. ‘What do you mean home?’

Butler took a step forward. ‘You know what I mean, Arno. Home. The place you’ve always been headed. The place you’ve sent so many others. Including me.’

Blunt pointed a shaky finger. ‘You stay away from me. I killed you once, I can do it again.’

Butler laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. ‘That’s where you’re wrong, Arno. I can’t be killed again. Anyway, death is no big deal, not compared to what comes after.’

‘What comes after...’

‘There is a hell, Arno,’ said Butler. ‘I’ve seen it and, believe me, so will you.’

Blunt was utterly convinced; after all, Butler had appeared from nowhere.

‘I didn’t know,’ he sobbed. ‘I didn’t believe it. I never would have shot you, Butler. I was just following Spiro’s orders. You heard him give the order. I was just the metal man; that’s all I’ve ever been.’

Butler laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘I believe you, Arno. You were just following orders.’

‘That’s right.’

‘But that’s not enough. You need to clear your conscience. If you don’t, I have to take you with me.’

Blunt’s eyes were red with tears. ‘How?’ he pleaded. ‘How do I do that?’

‘Confess your sins to the authorities. Leave nothing out, or I will be back.’

Blunt nodded eagerly. Prison was better than the alternative.

‘Remember, I will be watching. This is your one chance to save yourself. If you don’t take it, I will be back.’

Blunt’s teeth popped from his open mouth, rolling across the floor.

‘Don’ worry. I’ll confesh. I promish.’

Butler lifted the cam foil, concealing himself completely.

‘See that you do, or there’ll be hell to pay.’

Butler stepped into the corridor, stuffing the foil inside his jacket. Seconds later, Sid Commons reappeared with a security badge.

He caught sight of Arno Blunt standing stunned in his cell.

‘What did you do, Butler?’ he said.

‘Hey, it wasn’t me. Check your tapes. He just went crazy, talking to thin air. Yelling how he wanted to confess.’

‘He wants to confess? Just like that?’

‘I know how it sounds, but that’s what happened. If I were you, I’d give Justin Barre a call over at ScotlandYard. I have a feeling that Blunt’s statement could clear up a lot of outstanding cases.’

Commons squinted at him suspiciously. ‘Why do I have a feeling that you know more than you’re telling?’

‘Search me,’ said Butler. ‘But feelings aren’t evidence, and your own surveillance tapes will prove that I never set foot in that room.’

‘Are you sure that’s what they’ll show?’

Butler glanced at the patch of air shimmering above Sid Commons’s shoulder.

‘I am positive,’ he said.

CHAPTER 12: MIND WIPE

FOWL MANOR



THE return trip from Heathrow took over an hour, thanks to some particularly strong turbulence and an easterly wind over the Welsh hills. When Holly and Butler finally touched down in the grounds of Fowl Manor the LEP was busy humping their mind-wiping gear up the avenue, under cover of night.

Butler unclipped himself from the Moonbelt, leaning against the trunk of a silver birch.

‘You OK?’ asked Holly.

‘Fine,’ replied the bodyguard, massaging his chest. ‘It’s this Kevlar tissue. Handy if you get shot with a small calibre, but it’s playing havoc with my breathing.’

Holly sheathed her mechanical wings. ‘It’s the quiet life for you from now on.’

Butler noticed an LEP pilot attempting to park his shuttle in the double garage, nudging the Bentley’s bumper.

‘Quiet life?’ he muttered, heading for the garage. ‘I wish.’

Once Butler had finished terrorizing the pixie pilot he made for the study. Artemis and Juliet were waiting for him. Juliet hugged her brother so tightly that the air was squeezed from his lungs.

‘I’m OK, little sister. The fairies have fixed it so that I will live to well over a hundred. I’ll still be around to keep an eye on you.’

Artemis was all business. 'How did you fare, Butler?'

Butler opened a wall safe behind an air-conditioning vent.

'Pretty well. I got everything on the list.'

'What about the custom job?'

Butler laid out six small vials on the baize-covered desk.

'My man in Limerick followed your instructions to the letter. In all his years in the trade, he's never done anything like this. They're in a special solution to stop corrosion. The layers are so fine that once they come into contact with the air they begin to oxidize right away, so I suggest we don't insert them until the last possible moment.'

'Excellent. In all probability, I am the only one who will need these, but, just in case, we should all put them in.'

Butler held the gold coin up by its leather thong. 'I copied your diary and fairy files on to a laser minidisc, then brushed on a layer of gold leaf. It won't stand up to close examination, I'm afraid, but molten gold would have destroyed the information on the disc.'

Artemis tied the thong round his neck. 'It will have to do. Did you plant the false trails?'

'Yes. I sent an e-mail that has yet to be picked up, and I hired a few megabytes on an Internet storage site. I also took the liberty of burying a time capsule in the maze.'

Artemis nodded. 'Good. I hadn't thought of that.'

Butler accepted the compliment, but he didn't believe it. Artemis thought of everything.

Juliet spoke for the first time. 'You know, Artemis. Maybe it would be better to let these memories go. Give the fairies some peace of mind.'

'These memories are part of who I am,' responded Artemis.

He examined the vials on the table, selecting two.

'Now, everybody, it's time to put these in. I'm sure the People are eager to wipe our minds.'

Foaly's technical crew set up shop in the conference room, laying out

a complex assembly of electrodes and fibre-optic cable. Each cable was connected to a plasma screen that converted brainwaves to actual binary information. In layman's terms, Foaly would be able to read the humans' memories like a book and edit out what shouldn't be there. Possibly the most incredible part of the entire procedure was that the human brain itself would supply alternative memories to fill the blank spots.

'We could do the mind wipes with a field kit,' explained Foaly, once the patients were assembled. 'But field kits are just for blanket wipes. It would erase everything that's happened over the past sixteen months. That could have serious implications for your emotional development, not to mention your IQ. So, better we use the lab kit and simply erase the memories that pertain to the People. Obviously, we will have to erase the days you spent in fairy company completely. We can't take any chances there.'

Artemis, Butler and Juliet were seated round the table. Technical gnomes swabbed their temples with disinfectant.

'I've thought of something,' said Butler.

'Don't tell me,' interrupted the centaur. 'The age thing, right?'

Butler nodded. 'A lot of people know me as a forty-year-old man. You can't wipe them all.'

'Way ahead of you, Butler. We're going to give your face a laser peel while you're unconscious. Get rid of some of that dead skin. We even brought a cosmetic surgeon to give your forehead a Dewer injection to smooth out the wrinkles.'

'Dewer?'

'Fat,' explained the centaur. 'We take it from one area, and inject it into another.'

Butler was not enthused by the idea. 'This fat. It doesn't come from my behind, does it?'

Foaly shuffled uncomfortably. 'Well, it doesn't come from *your* behind.'

'Explain.'

‘Research has shown that of all the fairy races, dwarfs have the greatest longevity. There’s a miner in Poll Dyne who is allegedly over two thousand years old. Haven’t you ever heard the expression “smooth as a dwarf’s bottom”?’

Butler slapped away a technician who was attempting to attach an electrode patch to his head.

‘Are you telling me that fat from a dwarf’s backside is going to be injected into my head?’

Foaly shrugged. ‘The price of youth. There are pixies on the west bank paying a fortune for Dewer treatments.’

Butler spoke through gritted teeth. ‘I am not a pixie.’

‘We’ve also brought some gel to colour any hair you may decide to grow in the future, and some pigment dye to cover the cell corruption on your chest,’ continued the centaur hurriedly. ‘By the time you wake up, your exterior will look young again, even if your interior is old.’

‘Clever,’ said Artemis. ‘I expected as much.’

Holly entered with Mulch in tow. The dwarf was wearing cuffs and looking extremely sorry for himself.

‘Is this really necessary,’ he whined, ‘after all we’ve been through?’

‘My badge is on the line,’ retorted Holly. ‘The commander said to come back with you, or not at all.’

‘What do I have to do? I donated the fat, didn’t I?’

Butler rolled his eyes. ‘Please, no.’

Juliet giggled. ‘Don’t worry, Dom. You won’t remember a thing about it.’

‘Knock me out,’ said Butler. ‘Quickly.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ grumbled Mulch, attempting to rub his behind.

Holly uncuffed the dwarf, but stayed within grabbing distance.

‘He wanted to say goodbye, so here we are.’ She nudged Mulch with her shoulder. ‘So, say goodbye.’

Juliet winked. ‘Bye, Smelly.’

‘So long, Stinker.’

‘Don’t go chewing through any concrete walls.’

‘I don’t find that kind of thing funny,’ said Mulch, with a pained expression.

‘Who knows. Maybe we’ll see each other again.’

Mulch nodded at the technicians, busy firing up their hard drives.

‘If we do, thanks to these people, it’ll be the first time.’

Butler knelt to the dwarf’s level.

‘You look after yourself, little friend. Stay clear of goblins.’

Mulch shuddered. ‘You don’t have to tell me that.’

Commander Root’s face appeared on a roll-down screen erected by an LEP officer.

‘Maybe you two would like to get married?’ he barked. ‘I don’t know what all the emotion is about. In ten minutes you people won’t even remember this convict’s name!’

‘We have the commander online,’ said a technician, a tad unnecessarily.

Mulch stared at the button camera mounted on the screen. ‘Julius, please. Do you realize that all of these humans owe me their lives? This is an emotional moment for them.’

Root’s rosy complexion was exaggerated by poor reception.

‘I couldn’t care less about your touchy feely moment. I’m here to make sure this wipe goes smoothly. If I know our friend Fowl, he’s got a few tricks up his sleeve.’

‘Really, Commander,’ said Artemis. ‘Such suspicion is wounding.’

But the Irish teenager couldn’t suppress a grin. Everybody knew that he would have hidden items to spark residual memories; it was up to the LEP to find them. Their final contest.

Artemis stood and approached Mulch Diggums.

‘Mulch. Of all the fairy People, I will miss your services the most. We could have had such a future together.’

Mulch looked a touch teary. ‘True. With your brains and my special

talents.'

'Not to mention your mutual lack of morals,' interjected Holly.

'No bank on the planet would have been safe,' completed the dwarf. 'A missed opportunity.'

Artemis tried his best to look sincere. It was vital for the next step in the plan.

'Mulch, I know you risked your life betraying the Antonelli family, so I'd like to give you something.'

Mulch's imagination churned with visions of trust funds and offshore accounts.

'There's no need. Really. Although it was incredibly brave, and I was in mortal danger.'

'Exactly,' said Artemis, untying the gold medallion from round his neck. 'I know this isn't much, but it means a lot to me. I was going to keep it, but I realized that in a few minutes it will mean absolutely nothing. I would like you to have it; I think Holly would too. A little memento of our adventures.'

'Gee,' said Mulch, hefting the medallion. 'Half an ounce of gold. Great. You really broke the bank there, Artemis.'

Artemis gripped the dwarf's hand. 'It's not always about money, Mulch.'

Root was craning his neck, trying to see more. 'What's that? What has he given to the convict?'

Holly snatched the medallion, holding it up for the camera.

'Just a gold coin, Commander. I gave it to Artemis myself.'

Foaly glanced at the small medal. 'Actually this kills two stink worms with one skewer. The medallion could have triggered some residual memories. Highly unlikely, but possible.'

'And the other stink worm?'

'Mulch gets something to look at in prison.'

Root mulled it over for several moments.

'OK. He can keep it. Now get that convict into the shuttle and let's

get on with this. I've got a Council meeting in ten minutes.'

Holly led Mulch out, and Artemis realized that he really was sorry to see the dwarf go. But more than that, he was sorry that the memory of their friendship could be gone forever.

The technicians descended like flies on a carcass. In seconds every human in the room had electrodes attached to temples and wrists. Each set of electrodes ran through a neural transformer and on to a plasma screen. Memories flickered on the screens.

Foaly studied the images. 'Way too early,' he announced. 'Calibrate them to sixteen months ago. Actually, make that about three years. I don't want Artemis planning his initial kidnap all over again.'

'Bravo, Foaly,' said Artemis bitterly. 'I was hoping you might miss that.'

The centaur winked. 'That's not all I didn't miss.'

On the pull-down screen, Root's pixelated mouth stretched into a smile.

'Tell him, Foaly. I can't wait to see the human's face.'

Foaly consulted a file on his hand-held computer.

'We checked your e-mail and guess what?'

'Do tell.'

'We found a fairy file, just waiting to be delivered. We also ran a search on the Internet in general. And lo and behold, someone with your e-mail address had rented some storage megabytes. More fairy files.'

Artemis was unrepentant. 'I had to try. I'm sure you understand.'

'Nothing else you want to tell us about?'

Artemis opened his eyes wide, the epitome of innocence. 'Nothing. You're too clever for me.'

Foaly took a laserdisc from a toolbox, sliding it into the drive of a networked computer on the table. 'Well, just in case, I'm going to detonate a data charge in your computer system. The virus will leave your files unharmed, unless they pertain to the People. Not only that but the virus will monitor your system for a further six months, just in

case you have outwitted us somehow.'

'And you're telling me all this because I won't remember it anyway.'

Foaly did a little four-step, clapping his hands together. 'Exactly.'

Holly pushed through the door, dragging a metallic capsule behind her.

'Look what they found buried in the grounds.' She flipped the lid, pouring the capsule's contents on the Tunisian rug. Several computer disks and hard copies of Artemis's diary fanned across the carpet.

Foaly examined a disk. 'Something else you forgot to mention?'

Artemis was not quite so cocky now. His lifelines to the past were being cut one by one.

'It slipped my mind.'

'That's it, I suppose. There's nothing else.'

Artemis returned to his chair, folding his arms. 'And if I say yes, you'll believe me, I suppose.'

Root laughed so hard that it seemed the screen was shaking.

'Oh, yes, Artemis. We trust you completely. How could we not after all you've put the People through? If you don't mind, we'd like to ask you a few questions under the *mesmer*, and this time you won't be wearing sunglasses.'

Sixteen months previously, Artemis had successfully deflected Holly's hypnotic gaze with mirrored sunglasses. It was the first time he had outwitted the fairies. It was not to be the last.

'Well then, let's get on with it.'

'Captain Short,' barked Root. 'You know what to do.'

Holly removed her helmet, massaging the tips of her ears to get the circulation going.

'I'm going to mesmerize you and ask a few questions. It's not the first time you've been under, so you know that the procedure is not painful. I advise you to relax; if you try to resist, it could cause memory loss or even brain damage.'

Artemis held up his palm. 'Wait a moment. Am I right in thinking that when I wake up again this will all be over?'

Holly smiled. 'Yes, Artemis. This is goodbye, for the last time.'

Artemis's face was composed, in spite of the emotions churning inside him.

'Well then, I have a few things to say.'

Root was curious, in spite of himself. 'One minute, Fowl. Then mighty night.'

'Very well. Firstly, thank you. I have my family and friends around me thanks to the People. I wish I didn't have to forget that.'

Holly laid a hand on his shoulder. 'It's better this way, Artemis. Believe me.'

'And secondly, I want you all to think back to the first time you met me. Remember that night?'

Holly shuddered. She remembered the cold individual who had attacked her at a magical hot spot in southern Ireland. Commander Root would never forget escaping an exploding tanker by the skin of his wings, and Foaly's first glimpse of Artemis had been a recording of the negotiations for Holly's release. He had been a despicable creature.

'If you take away the memories and influences of the People,' continued Artemis, 'I might become that person again. Is that what you really want?'

It was a chilling thought. Were the People responsible for Artemis's transformation? And were they to be responsible for changing him back?

Holly turned to the screen. 'Is it possible? Artemis has come a long way. Do we have the right to destroy all that progress?'

'He's right,' added Foaly. 'I never thought I would say this, but I kinda like the new model.'

Root opened another computer window on the screen. 'The Psych Brotherhood did this probability report for us. They say the chances of a reversion are slim. Fowl will still have strong positive influences

from his family and the Butlers.’

‘The Psych Brotherhood?’ objected Holly. ‘Argon and his cronies? And when exactly did we start trusting those witch doctors?’

Root opened his mouth to yell, but thought better of it. Not something that happened every day.

‘Holly,’ he said, almost gently. ‘The future of our culture is at stake here. The bottom line is that Artemis’s future is not our problem.’

Holly’s mouth was a grim slash. ‘If that’s true, then we’re as bad as the Mud People.’

The commander decided to revert to his usual mode of communication.

‘Listen to me, Captain,’ he roared. ‘Being in command means making tough decisions. Not being in command means shutting up and doing what you’re told. Now mesmerize those humans before we lose the link.’

‘Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir.’

Holly stood directly in front of Artemis, careful to make eye contact.

‘Goodbye, Holly. I won’t see you again, though I’m sure you will see me.’

‘Just relax, Artemis. Deep breaths.’

When Holly spoke again, her voice was layered with bass and alto. The hypnotic layers of the *mesmer*.

‘That was some job we did on Spiro, eh?’

Artemis smiled sleepily. ‘Yes. The last adventure. No more hurting people.’

‘How do you come up with these plans?’

Artemis’s lids drooped. ‘Natural ability, I suppose. Handed down by generations of Fowls.’

‘I bet you would do anything to hang on to your fairy memories?’

‘Almost anything.’

‘So what *did* you do?’

Artemis smiled. 'I played a few little tricks.'

'What kind of tricks?' pressed Holly.

'It's a secret. I can't tell you.'

Holly added a few more layers to her voice.

'Tell me, Artemis. It will be our secret.'

A vein pulsed in Artemis's temple. 'You won't tell? You won't tell the fairies?'

Holly glanced guiltily at the screen. Root gestured at her to continue.

'I won't tell. It will be just between us.'

'Butler hid a capsule in the maze.'

'And?'

'I sent myself an e-mail. But I expect Foaly to find that. It's to throw him off-guard.'

'Very clever. Is there anything you don't expect him to find?'

Artemis smiled craftily. 'I hid a file on an Internet storage site. Foaly's data charge won't affect it. The providers will mail me a reminder in six months. When I retrieve the data it should trigger residual memories and possibly total recall.'

'Anything else?'

'No. The storage site is our last hope. If the centaur finds that, then the fairy world is lost forever.'

Root's image crackled on the screen. 'OK. The uplink is breaking up. Knock them out and wipe them. Tape the whole process. I won't believe Artemis is out of the game until I see the footage.'

'Commander. Maybe I should ask the others a few questions.'

'Negative, Captain. Fowl said it himself. The storage site was their last hope. Hook them up and run the program.'

The commander's image disappeared in waves of static.

'Yes, sir.' Holly turned to the technical crew. 'You heard the fairy. Let's go. Sun up is in a couple of hours. I want us below ground before that.'

The techies checked that the electrodes had strong contacts, then unwrapped three sets of sleep goggles.

‘I’ll do that,’ said Holly, taking the masks.

She hooked the elastic over Juliet’s ponytail.

‘You know something?’ she said. ‘Personal protection is a cold business. You have too much heart for it.’

Juliet nodded slowly. ‘I’ll try to hold on to that thought.’

Holly settled the eyepieces gently.

‘I’ll keep an eye on you.’

Juliet smiled. ‘See you in my dreams.’

Holly pressed a small button on the sleep mask, and a combination of hypno-lights in the eyepieces and sedative administered through the seals knocked Juliet out in less than five seconds.

Butler was next. The technical crew had added a length of elastic to the mask’s strap so that it could encircle his shaven crown.

‘Make sure Foaly doesn’t go crazy with that mind wiper,’ said the bodyguard. ‘I don’t want to wake up with four decades of nothing in my head.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Holly reassuringly. ‘Foaly generally knows what he’s doing.’

‘Good. Remember, if the People ever do need help, I’m available.’

Holly pressed the button.

‘I’ll remember that,’ she whispered.

Artemis was last in the line. In his mesmerized state he seemed almost peaceful. For once, there were no thought lines wrinkling his brow and, if you didn’t know him, he could almost be a normal thirteen-year-old human.

Holly turned to Foaly. ‘Are you sure about this?’

The centaur shrugged. ‘What choice do we have? Orders are orders.’

Holly placed the mask over Artemis’s eyes and pushed the button. Seconds later, the teenager slumped in his chair. Immediately, lines of

Gnommish text began to flash across the screen behind him. In the days of Frond, Gnommish had been written in spirals. But reading in spirals gave most fairies a migraine.

‘Commence deleting,’ ordered Foaly. ‘But keep a copy. Some time when I have a few weeks off I’m going to find out what makes this guy tick.’

Holly watched Artemis’s life being written in green symbols on the screen.

‘This doesn’t feel right,’ she commented. ‘If he found us once, he could find us again. Especially if he becomes the monster he used to be.’

Foaly tapped commands into an ergonomic keyboard. ‘Maybe. But next time we’ll be ready.’

Holly sighed. ‘It’s a pity, because now we were almost friends.’

The centaur snorted. ‘Sure. Like you can be friends with a viper.’

Holly suddenly shut her helmet visor, hiding her eyes.

‘You’re right, of course. We could never have been friends. It was circumstance that pushed us together, nothing more.’

Foaly patted her shoulder. ‘That’s the girl. Keep your ears up. Where are you going?’

‘Tara,’ replied Holly. ‘I’m going to fly. I need the fresh air.’

‘You don’t have clearance for a flight,’ objected Foaly. ‘Root will have your badge.’

‘For what?’ said Holly, firing up her wings. ‘I’m not supposed to be here, remember?’

And she was gone, flying in a lazy loop through the entrance hall. She cleared the main door with centimetres to spare, climbing quickly into the night sky. For a second, her slim frame was backlit by the full moon, and then she disappeared, vibrating out of the visible spectrum.

Foaly watched her go. Emotional creatures, elves. In some respects they made the worst Recon operatives. All decisions were taken by the heart. But Root would never fire Holly, because policing was what

she was born to do. And anyway, who else would save the People if Artemis Fowl ever found them again?

Mulch sat in the shuttle's holding booth feeling extremely sorry for himself. He tried to sit on the bench without actually touching it with his tender behind. Not an easy task.

Things did not look good, it had to be said. Even after all he'd done for the LEP they were going to lock him up for at least a decade. Just for stealing a few measly bars of gold. And it didn't seem likely that he'd get an opportunity to escape. He was surrounded by steel and laser bars, and would remain so until the shuttle docked in Haven. After that it was a quick jaunt to Police Plaza, a summary hearing and off to a secure facility until his beard turned grey. Which it would, if he was forced to spend more than five years out of the tunnels.

But there was hope. A tiny glimmer. Mulch forced himself to wait until all the technical staff had cleared their equipment from the shuttle. Then he casually opened his right hand, rubbing his temples with thumb and forefinger. What he was actually doing was reading the tiny note concealed in his palm – the one slipped to him by Artemis Fowl when they shook hands.

I have not finished with you yet, Mulch Diggums –

the note read.

On your return, tell your lawyer to check the date on the original search warrant for your cave. When you are released keep your nose clean for a couple of years. The bring the medallion to me. Together we will be unstoppable.

*Your friend and benefactor,
Artemis Fowl the Second*

Mulch crumpled the note. He made a cylinder of his fingers and sucked the paper into his mouth. His dwarf molars quickly destroyed

the evidence.

Mulch breathed deeply through his nose. It wasn't time to pop the Skaylian Rock Worm Wine cork just yet. A review of his case could take months, possibly years. But there was hope.

The dwarf wrapped his fingers round Artemis's medallion. Together they would be unstoppable.

EPILOGUE

ARTEMIS FOWL'S JOURNAL. DISK 1. ENCRYPTED.

I have decided to keep a diary. In fact, I am surprised that the idea has never occurred to me before. An intellect such as mine should be documented so that future generations of Fowls can take advantage of my brilliant ideas.

Of course, I must be careful with such a document. As valuable as it would be to my descendants, it would be more valuable to the law enforcement agents who are forever trying to gather evidence against me.

It is even more important that I keep this journal a secret from my father. He is not himself since his escape from Russia. He has become obsessed with nobility and heroism. Abstract concepts at best. As far as I know, nobility and heroism are not accepted by any of the world's major banks. The family's fortune is in my hands, and I will preserve it in the way I always have, through ingenious plots. Most of these plots will be illegal. The best always are. Real profit lies in the shadowy areas beyond the law.

I have decided, however, out of respect for my parents' values, to change my criteria for victim selection. It would seem better for the world's ecology if several global corporations went bankrupt, and so I have resolved to help them on their way. Not victimless crimes, but ones where few tears will be shed for the injured parties. This does not mean that I have become a weak, latter-day Robin Hood. Far from it. I intend to reap substantial benefits from my crimes.

My father is not the only one to have changed. Butler has grown old almost overnight. His appearance is the same as ever, but he has slowed down considerably, no matter how he tries to hide it. But I will not replace him. He has been a loyal employee, and his expertise in matters of

intelligence will be invaluable. Perhaps Juliet will accompany me when actual protection is needed, though she now claims that a life in personal protection is not for her. Next week she travels to the United States to try out for a wrestling team. Apparently she has chosen 'Jade Princess' as her stage name. I can only hope that she fails the audition. Though I doubt it. She is a Butler, after all.

Of course, I have some ongoing ventures that I can work on without the aid of a bodyguard. In recent years I have developed software to divert funds from various bank accounts to my own. This software will have to be upgraded to stay ahead of the computer crime squads. Version 2.0 should be online within six months. Then there is my talent for art forgery. In the past I have favoured the Impressionists, but now, for some reason, I am drawn to more fantastical subject matter, such as the fairy creatures depicted by Pascal Hervé in his Magical World series. But these projects must be suspended temporarily, for today I discovered that I am the victim of a conspiracy.

The day began strangely. When I awoke I experienced an instant of weakness. For a single moment before I opened my eyes, I felt content, my drive to accumulate wealth forgotten. This has never happened before. Perhaps the mood was left over from some magical dream, or perhaps my father's new-found positive attitude is contagious. Whatever the cause, I must be careful to avoid such lapses in the future. With my father in his current frame of mind, this is no time to lose my resolve. I must remain as driven as always. Crime is the way forward for the Fowls. Aurum potestas est.

Minutes later, a greater mystery presented itself. As I washed my face at the basin, a tiny object fell from one of my eyes. Close examination in the lab revealed it to be a semi-corroded, tinted contact lens. Not only that, but a mirrored layer had been added behind the tinted lens. Ingenious. Undoubtedly the work of a master craftsman. But to what purpose? It is strange, but even though I have no knowledge of this lens, or how it came to be in my eye, I feel the answer is somewhere in my own brain. Hidden in the shadows.

Imagine my surprise when Juliet and Butler discovered mirrored lenses

in their own eyes. These lenses are so clever they could have been my own invention, so obviously this unknown adversary must not be underestimated.

I will track the culprit down, make no mistake. No clue will be left uninvestigated. Butler has a contact in Limerick, an expert in the field of lenses and scopes. He may recognize our intruder's handiwork. Butler is on his way there, as I write.

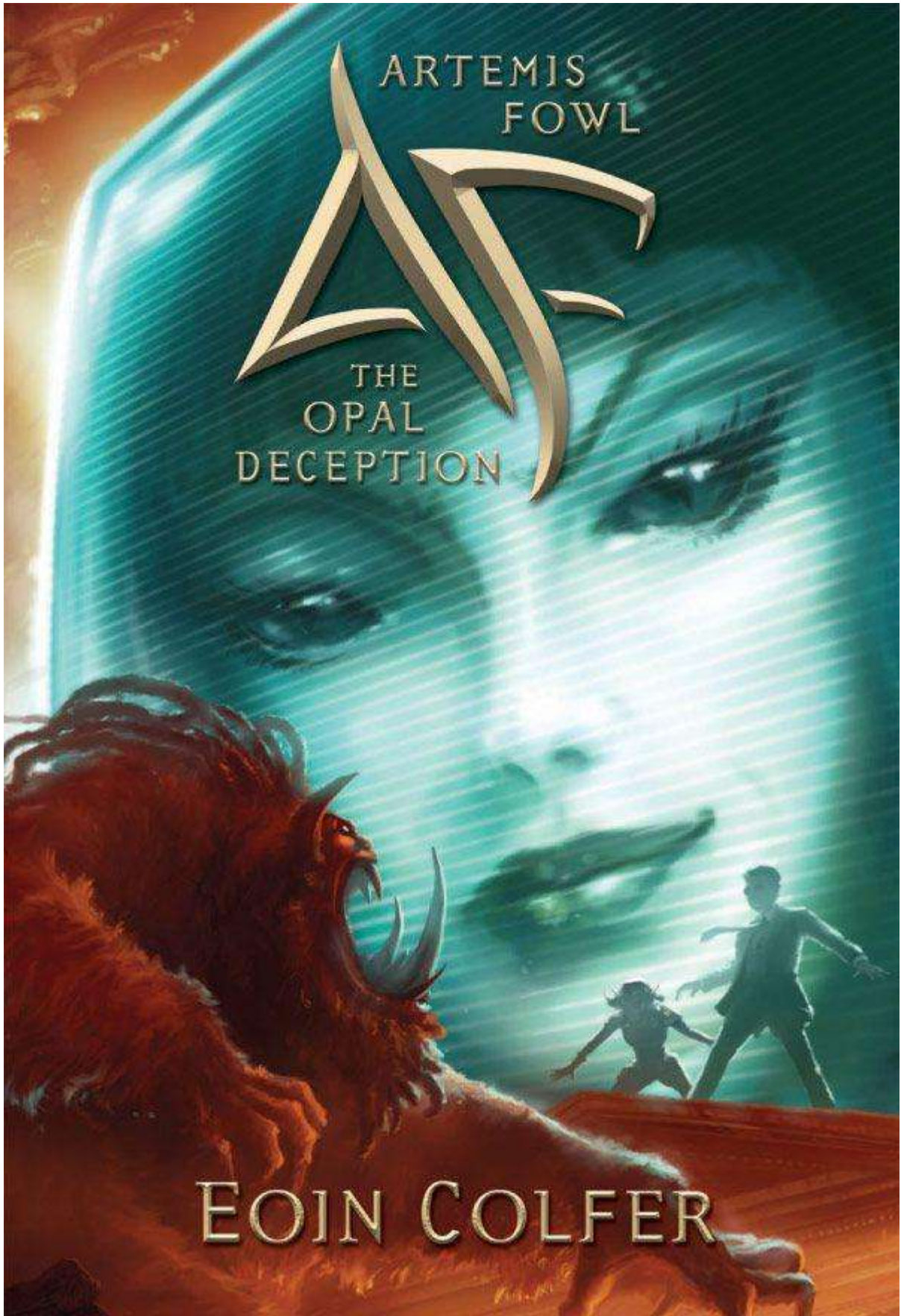
And so, a new chapter begins in the life of Artemis Fowl the Second. In a matter of days my father returns with his new-found conscience. I will shortly be shipped off to boarding school, where I will have access to a pathetic computer centre and an even more pathetic laboratory. My bodyguard seems to be too old for physical tasks and there is an unknown adversary planting strange objects on my very person.

Overwhelming difficulties, you may think. An ordinary person would draw the shutters and hide from the world. But I am no ordinary person. I am Artemis Fowl, the latest in the Fowl crime dynasty, and I will not be turned from my path. I will find whoever planted those lenses and they will pay for their presumption. And once I am rid of this nuisance, my plans will proceed unhindered. I shall unleash a crime wave the like of which has never been seen. The world will remember the name of Artemis Fowl.

ARTEMIS
FOWL

THE
OPAL
DECEPTION

EOIN COLFER





THE OPAL
DECEPTION

EOIN COLFER

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New York

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For Sarah—

The pen is mightier than the word processor

PROLOGUE

This article was posted on the fairy Internet, on the site www.horsesense.gnom. It is believed that this site is maintained by the centaur Foaly, technical consultant to the Lower Elements Police, although this has never been proved. Almost every detail of the following account contradicts the official release from the LEP Press Office.

We've all heard the official explanation for the tragic events surrounding the Zito Probe investigation. The LEP's statement contained little in the way of concrete detail, preferring to fudge the facts and question the decisions of a certain female officer.

I know for an absolute fact that the officer in question, Captain Holly Short, behaved in an exemplary manner, and if it had not been for her skill as a field operative, many more lives would have been lost. Instead of scapegoating Captain Short, the Lower Elements Police should give her a medal.

Humans are at the center of this particular case. Most humans aren't smart enough to find the leg holes in their trousers, but there are certain Mud Men clever enough to make me nervous. If they discover the existence of an underground fairy city, they will certainly do their best to exploit the residents. Most men would be no match for superior fairy technology, but there are some humans who are almost smart enough to pass as fairies. One human in particular. I think we all know who I'm talking about.

In fairy history only one human has bested us. And it really sticks in my hoof that this particular human is little more than a boy. Artemis Fowl, the Irish criminal mastermind.

Little Arty led the LEP in a merry dance across the continents, until finally, they used fairy technology to wipe the knowledge of our existence from his mind. But even as the gifted centaur Foaly pressed the mind-wipe button, he wondered if the Fairy People were being fooled again. Had the Irish boy left something behind to make himself remember? Of course he had, as we were all to find out later.

Artemis Fowl does play a significant role in the following events, but for once he was not trying to steal from the People, as he had completely forgotten we existed. No, the mastermind behind this episode is actually a fairy.

So, who is involved in this tragic tale of two worlds? Who are the main fairy players? Obviously, Foaly is the real hero of the piece. Without his innovations, the LEP would soon be beating the Mud Men back from our doors. He is the unsung hero who solves riddles of the ages, while the Reconnaissance and Retrieval teams swan about aboveground taking all the glory.

Then there's Captain Holly Short, the officer whose reputation is under fire. Holly is one of the LEP's best and brightest. A natural-born pilot with a gift for improvisation in the field. She's not the best at taking orders, a trait that has landed her in trouble on more than one occasion. Holly was the fairy at the center of all the Artemis Fowl incidents. The pair had almost become friends, when the Council ordered the LEP to mind-wipe Artemis, and just when he was becoming a nice Mud Boy, too.

As we all know, Commander Julius Root had a role in the proceedings. The youngest-ever full commander in the LEP. An elf who had steered the People through many a crisis. Not the easiest fairy to get along with, but sometimes the best leaders do not make the best friends.

I suppose Mulch Diggums deserves mention. Until recently, Mulch was imprisoned, but he had once again managed to wriggle his way out. This kleptomaniac, flatulent dwarf has played a reluctant part in many of the Fowl adventures. But Holly was glad to have his help on

this mission. If not for Mulch and his bodily functions, things could have turned out a lot worse than they did. And they turned out badly enough.

At the very center of this case lies Opal Koboï, the pixie who bankrolled the goblin gang's attempted takeover of Haven City.

Opal had been facing a lifetime behind laser bars. That is, if she ever recovered from the coma that had claimed the pixie when Holly Short foiled her plan.

For almost a year, Opal Koboï had languished in the padded-cell wing of the J. Argon Clinic, showing no response to the medical warlocks who tried to revive her. In all that time, she spoke not a single word, ate not a mouthful of food, and exhibited no response to stimuli. At first the authorities were suspicious. It is an act! they declared. Koboï is faking catatonia to avoid prosecution. But as the months rolled by, even the most skeptical were convinced. No one could pretend to be in a coma for almost a year. Surely not. A fairy would have to be totally obsessed. .

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CHAPTER 1

TOTALLY OBSESSED

The J. Argon Clinic, Haven City, The Lower Elements; Three Months Earlier

The J. Argon Clinic was not a state hospital. Nobody stayed there for free. Argon and his staff of psychologists only treated fairies who could afford it. Of all the clinic's wealthy patients, Opal Koboï was unique. She had set up an emergency fund for herself more than a year before she was committed, *just in case* she ever went insane and needed to pay for treatment. It was a smart move. If Opal hadn't set up the fund, her family would undoubtedly have moved her to a cheaper facility. Not that the facility itself made much difference to Koboï, who had spent the past year drooling and having her reflexes tested. Dr. Argon doubted if Opal would have noticed a bull troll beating its chest before her.

The fund was not the only reason why Opal was unique. Koboï was the Argon Clinic's celebrity patient. Following the attempt by the B'wa Kell goblin triad to seize power, Opal Koboï's name had become the most infamous four syllables under the world. After all, the pixie billionaire had formed an alliance with disgruntled LEP officer Briar Cudgeon, and funded the triad's war on Haven. Koboï had betrayed her own kind, and now her own mind was betraying her.

For the first six months of Koboï's incarceration, the clinic had been besieged by media filming the pixie's every twitch. The LEP guarded her cell door in shifts, and every staff member in the facility was treated to background checks and stern glares. Nobody was exempt. Even Dr. Argon himself was subjected to random DNA swabs to ensure that he was who he said he was. The LEP wasn't taking any chances with Koboï. If she escaped from Argon's Clinic, not only would they be the laughingstock of the fairy world, but a highly dangerous criminal would be unleashed on Haven City.

But as time went by, fewer camera crews turned up at the gates each morning. After all, how many hours of drooling can an audience be expected to sit through? Gradually, the LEP crews were downsized from a dozen to six and finally to a single officer per shift. Where could Opal Koboï go? the authorities reasoned. There were a dozen cameras focused on her, twenty-four hours a day.

There was a subcutaneous seeker-sleeper under the skin of her upper arm, and she was DNA swabbed four times daily. And even if someone did get Opal out, what could they do with her? The pixie couldn't even stand without help, and the sensors said her brain waves were little more than flat lines.

That said, Dr. Argon was very proud of his prize patient, and mentioned her name often at dinner parties. Since Opal Koboï had been admitted to the clinic, it had become almost fashionable to have a relative in therapy. Almost every family on the rich list had a crazy uncle in the attic. Now that crazy uncle could receive the best of care in the lap of luxury.

If only every fairy in the facility was as docile as Opal Koboï. All she needed was a few intravenous tubes and a monitor, which had been more than paid for by her first six months' medical fees. Dr. Argon fervently hoped that little Opal never woke up. Because once she did, the LEP would haul her off to court. And when she had been convicted of treason her assets would be frozen, including the clinic's fund. No, the longer Opal's nap lasted, the better for everyone, especially her. Because of their thin skulls and large brain volume, pixies were susceptible to various maladies, such as catatonia, amnesia, and narcolepsy. So it was quite possible that her coma would last for several years. And even if Opal did wake up, it was quite possible that her memory would stay locked up in some drawer in her huge pixie brain.

Dr. J. Argon did his rounds every night. He didn't perform much hands-on therapy anymore, but he felt that it was good for the staff to feel his presence. If the other doctors knew that Jerbal Argon kept his finger on the pulse, then they were more likely to keep their own fingers on that pulse, too.

Argon always saved Opal for last. It calmed him somehow to see the small pixie asleep in her harness. Often at the end of a stressful day, he even envied Opal her untroubled existence. When it had all become too much for the pixie, her brain had simply shut down, all except for the most vital functions. She still breathed, and occasionally the monitors registered a dream spike in her brain waves. But other than that, for all intents and purposes, Opal Koboï was no more.

On one fateful night, Jerbal Argon was feeling more stressed than usual. His wife was suing for divorce on the grounds that he hadn't said more than six consecutive words to her in over two years. The Council was threatening to pull his government grant because of all the money he was making from his new celebrity clients, and he had a pain in his hip that no amount of magic could seem to cure. The warlocks said it was probably all in his head. They seemed to think that was funny.

Argon limped down the clinic's eastern wing, checking the plasma chart of each patient as he passed their room. He winced each time his left foot touched the floor.

The two janitor pixies, Mervall and Descant Brill were outside Opal's room, picking up dust with static brushes. Pixies made wonderful employees. They were methodical, patient, and determined. When a pixie was instructed to do something, you could rest assured that that thing would be done. Plus, they were cute, with their baby faces and disproportionately large heads. Just looking at a pixie cheered most people up. They were walking therapy.

"Evening, boys," said Argon. "How's our favorite patient?"

Merv, the elder twin, glanced up from his brush. "Same old, same old, Jerry," he said. "I thought she moved a toe earlier, but it was just a trick of the light."

Argon laughed, but it was forced. He did not like to be called Jerry. It was his clinic after all; he deserved some respect. But good janitors were like gold dust, and the Brill brothers had been keeping the building spotless and shipshape for nearly two years now. The Brills were

almost celebrities themselves. Twins were very rare among the People. Mervall and Descant were the only pixie pair currently residing in Haven. They had been featured on several TV programs, including *Canto*, PPTV's highest-rated chat show.

LEP's Corporal Grub Kelp was on sentry duty. When Argon reached Opal's room, the corporal was engrossed in a movie on his video goggles. Argon didn't blame him. Guarding Opal Koboï was about as exciting as watching toenails grow.

"Good film?" inquired the doctor pleasantly.

Grub raised the lenses. "Not bad. It's a human Western. Plenty of shooting and squinting."

"Maybe I'll borrow it when you're finished?"

"No problem, doctor. But handle it carefully. Human disks are very expensive. I'll give you a special cloth."

Argon nodded. He remembered Grub Kelp now. The LEP officer was very particular about his possessions. He had already written two letters of complaint to the clinic board about a protruding floor rivet that had scratched his boots.

Argon consulted Koboï's chart. The plasma screen on the wall displayed a constantly updated feed from the sensors attached to her temples. There was no change, nor did he expect there to be. Her vitals were all normal, and her brain activity was minimal. She'd had a dream earlier in the evening but now her mind had settled. And finally, as if he needed telling, the seeker-sleeper implanted in her arm informed him that Opal Koboï was indeed where she was supposed to be. Generally, the seeker-sleepers were implanted in the head, but pixie skulls were too fragile for any local surgery.

Jerbal punched in his personal code on the reinforced door's keypad. The heavy door slid back to reveal a spacious room with gently pulsing floor mood lights. The walls were soft plastic, and gentle sounds of nature spilled from recessed speakers. At the moment a brook was splashing over flat rocks.

In the middle of the room, Opal Koboï hung suspended in a full body harness. The straps were gel padded and they adjusted automatically to any body movement. If Opal did happen to wake, the harness could be remotely triggered to seal like a net, preventing her from harming herself or escaping.

Argon checked the monitor pads, making sure they had good contact on Koboï's forehead. He lifted one of the pixie's eyelids, shining a pencil light at the pupil. It contracted slightly, but Opal did not avert her eyes.

"Well, anything to tell me today, Opal?" asked the doctor softly. "An opening chapter for my book?"

Argon liked to talk to Koboï, just in case she could hear. When she woke up, he reasoned, he would have already established rapport.

"Nothing? Not a single insight?"

Opal did not react. As she hadn't for almost a year.

"Ah well," said Argon, swabbing the inside of Koboï's mouth with the last cotton ball in his pocket. "Maybe tomorrow, eh?"

He rolled the cotton ball across a sponge pad on his clipboard. Seconds later, Opal's name flashed up on a tiny screen.

"DNA never lies," muttered Argon, tossing the ball into a recycling bin.

With one last look at his patient, Jerbal Argon turned toward the door.

"Sleep well, Opal," he said almost fondly.

He felt calm again, the pain in his hip almost forgotten. Koboi was as far under as she had ever been. She wasn't going to wake up any time soon. The Koboi fund was safe.

It's amazing just how wrong one gnome can be.

Opal Koboi was not catatonic, but neither was she awake. She was somewhere in between, floating in a liquid world of meditation, where every memory was a bubble of multicolored light popping gently in her consciousness.

Since her early teens Opal had been a disciple of Gola Schweem, the cleansing coma guru. Schweem's theory was that there was a deeper level of sleep than experienced by most fairies. The cleansing coma state could usually only be reached after decades of discipline and practice. Opal had reached her first cleansing coma at the age of fourteen.

The benefits of the cleansing coma were that a fairy could spend the sleep time thinking, or in this case, plotting, and also awake feeling completely refreshed. Opal's coma was so complete that her mind was almost entirely separated from her body. She could fool the sensors, and felt no embarrassment at the indignities of intravenous feeding and assisted bathings. The longest recorded consciously self-induced coma was forty-seven days. Opal had been under for eleven months and counting, though she wasn't planning to be counting much longer.

When Opal Koboi had joined forces with Briar Cudgeon and his goblins, she had realized that she would need a backup plan. Their scheme to overthrow the LEP had been ingenious, but there had always been a chance that something could go wrong. In the event that it did, Opal had had no intention of spending the rest of her life in prison. The only way she could make a clean getaway was if everybody thought she was still locked up. So Opal had begun to make preparations.

The first had been to set up the emergency fund for the Argon Clinic. This would ensure that she would be sent to the right place if she had to induce a cleansing coma. The second step had been to get two of her most trusted personnel installed in the clinic, to help with her eventual escape. Then she began siphoning huge amounts of gold from her businesses. Opal did not wish to become an impoverished exile.

The final step had been to donate some of her own DNA, and green-light the creation of a clone that would take her place in the padded cell. Cloning was completely illegal, and had been banned by fairy law for more than five hundred years, since the first experiments in Atlantis. Cloning was by no means a perfect science. Doctors had never been able to create an exact fairy clone. The clones looked fine, but they were basically shells with only enough brain power to run the body's basic functions. They were missing the spark of true life. A fully grown clone resembled nothing more than the original person in a coma. Perfect.

Opal had had a greenhouse lab constructed far from Koboi Industries, and had diverted enough funds to keep the project active for two years: the exact time it would take to grow a clone of herself to adulthood. Then, when she wanted to escape from the Argon Clinic, a perfect replica of herself would be left in her place. The LEP would never know she was gone.

As things had turned out, she had been right to plan ahead. Briar had proved treacherous, and a small group of fairies and humans had ensured that his betrayal would lead to her own downfall. Now Opal had a goal to bolster her willpower. She would maintain this coma for as long as it took, because there was a score to be settled. Foaly, Root, Holly Short, and the human Artemis Fowl. They were the ones responsible for her defeat. Soon she would be free of this clinic, and then she would visit those who had caused her such despair and give them a little despair of their own. Once her enemies were defeated she could proceed with the second phase of her plan: introducing the Mud Men to the People in a way that could not be covered up by a

few mind wipes. The secret life of fairies was almost at an end.

Opal Koboï's brain released a few happy endorphins. The thought of revenge always gave her a warm fuzzy feeling.

The Brill brothers watched Dr. Argon limp up the corridor.

"Moron," muttered Merv, using his telescopic vacuum pole to chase some dust out of a corner.

"You said it," agreed Scant. "Old Jerry couldn't analyze a bowl of vole curry. No wonder his wife is leaving him. If he was any good as a shrink, he would've seen that coming."

Merv collapsed the vacuum. "How are we doing?"

Scant checked his moonometer. "Ten past eight."

"Good. How's Corporal Kelp?"

"Still watching the movie. This guy is perfect. We have to go tonight. The LEP could send someone smart for the next shift. And if we wait any longer the clone will grow another inch."

"You're right. Check the spy cameras."

Scant lifted the lid on what appeared to be a janitor's trolley, festooned as it was with mops, rags, and sprays. Hidden beneath a tray of vacuum nozzles, was a color monitor split into several screens.

"Well?" hissed Merv.

Scant did not answer immediately, taking time to check all the screens. The video feed was from various microcameras that Opal had installed around the clinic before her incarceration. The spy cameras were actually genetically engineered organic material. So the pictures they sent were literally a live feed. The world's first living machines. Totally undetectable by bug sweepers.

"Night crew only," he said at last. "Nobody in this sector except Corporal Idiot over there."

"What about the parking lot?"

"Clear."

Merv held out his hand. "Okay, brother. This is it. No turning back. Are we in? Do we want Opal Koboï back?"

Scant blew a lock of black hair from one round pixie eye.

"Yes, because if she comes back on her own, Opal will find a way to make us suffer," he said, shaking his brother's hand. "So yes, we're in."

Merv took a remote control from his pocket. The device was tuned to a sonix receiver planted in the clinic's gable wall. This in turn was connected to a balloon of acid that lay gently on the clinic's main power cube in the parking lot junction box. A second balloon sat atop the backup cube in the maintenance basement. As the clinic's janitors, it had been a simple matter for Merv and Scant to plant the acid balloons the previous evening. Of course, the Argon Clinic was also connected to the main grid, but if the cubes did go down, there would be a two-minute interval before the main power kicked in. There was no need for more elaborate arrangements; after all, this was a medical facility, not a prison.

Merv took a deep breath, flicked the safety cover, and pressed the red button. The remote control emitted an infrared command activating two sonix charges. The charges sent out sound waves that burst the balloons, and the balloons dumped their acidic contents on the clinic's power cubes. Twenty seconds later the cubes were completely eaten away and the whole building was plunged into darkness. Merv and Scant quickly put on night-vision goggles.

As soon as the power failed, green strip lights began pulsing gently on the floor, guiding the way to the exits. Merv and Scant moved quickly and purposefully. Scant steered the trolley, and Merv made straight for Corporal Kelp.

Grub was pulling the video glasses from over his eyes.

“Hey,” he said, disoriented by the sudden darkness. “What’s going on here?”

“Power failure,” said Merv, bumping into him with calculated clumsiness. “Those lines are a nightmare. I’ve been telling Dr. Argon, but nobody wants to spend money on maintenance when there are fancy company cars to be bought.”

Merv was not chatting for the fun of it; he was waiting for the soluble sedative pad he had pressed onto Grub’s wrist to take effect.

“Tell me about it,” said Grub, suddenly blinking a lot more than he generally did. “I’ve been lobbying for new lockers at Police Plaza. I’m really thirsty. Is anyone else thirsty?” Grub stiffened, frozen by the serum that was spreading through his system. The LEP officer would snap out of it in under two minutes and be instantly alert. He would have no memory of his unconsciousness, and with luck, he would not notice the time lapse.

“Go,” said Scant tersely.

Merv was already gone. With ease, he punched Dr. Argon’s code into Opal’s door. He completed this action faster than Argon ever could, due to hours spent practicing on a stolen pad in his apartment. Argon’s code changed every week, but the Brill brothers made certain that they were cleaning outside the room when Argon was on his rounds. The pixies generally had the complete code by midweek.

The battery-powered pad light winked green, and the door slid back. Opal Koboï swung gently before him, suspended in her harness like a bug in an exotic cocoon.

Merv winched her down onto the trolley. Moving briskly, and with practiced precision, he rolled up Opal’s sleeve and located the scar in her upper arm where the seeker-sleeper had been inserted. He gripped the hard lump between his thumb and forefinger.

“Scalpel,” he said, holding out his free hand. Scant passed him the instrument. Merv took a breath, held it, and made a one-inch incision in Opal’s flesh. He wiggled his index finger into the hole and rolled out the electronic capsule. It was encased in silicone and roughly the size of a painkiller.

“Seal it up,” he ordered.

Scant bent close to the wound and placed a thumb at each end.

“Heal,” he whispered, and blue sparks of fairy magic ran rings around his fingers, sinking into the wound. In seconds the folds of skin had zipped themselves together, with only a pale pink scar to show that a cut had been made—a scar almost identical to the one that already existed. Opal’s own magic had dried up months ago, as she was in no position to complete a power-restoring ritual.

“Miss Koboï,” said Merv briskly. “Time to get up. Wakey-wakey.”

He unstrapped Opal completely from the harness. The unconscious pixie collapsed onto the lid of the cleaning trolley. Merv slapped her across the cheek, bringing a blush to her face. Opal’s breathing rate increased slightly, but her eyes remained closed.

“Jolt her,” said Scant.

Merv pulled an LEP-issue buzz baton from inside his jacket. He powered it up and touched Opal on the elbow. The pixie’s body jerked spasmodically, and Opal Koboï shot into consciousness, a sleeper waking from a nightmare.

“Cudgeon,” she screamed. “You betrayed me!”

Merv grabbed her shoulders. "Miss Koboi. It's us, Mervall and Descant. It's time."

Opal glared at him, wild eyed.

"Brill?" she said after several deep breaths.

"That's right. Merv and Scant. We need to go."

"Go? What do you mean?"

"Leave," said Merv urgently. "We have about a minute."

Opal shook her head, dislodging the after-trance daze. "Merv and Scant. We need to go."

Merv helped her from the trolley's lid. "That's right. The clone is ready."

Scant peeled back a sealed foil false bottom in the trolley. Inside lay a cloned replica of Opal Koboi wearing an Argon Clinic coma suit. The clone was identical, down to the last follicle. Scant removed an oxygen mask from the clone's face, hauled it from its resting place, and began cinching her into the harness.

"Remarkable," said Opal, brushing the clone's skin with her knuckle. "Am I that beautiful?"

"Oh yes," said Merv. "That and more."

Suddenly, Opal screeched. "Idiots. Its eyes are open. It can see me!"

Scant closed the clone's lids hurriedly. "Don't worry, Miss Koboi, it can't tell anyone, even if its brain could decipher what it sees."

Opal climbed groggily into the trolley. "But its eyes can register images. Foaly may think to check. That infernal centaur."

"Don't fret, Miss," said Scant, folding the trolley's false bottom over his mistress. "Very soon now, that will be the least of Foaly's worries."

Opal strapped the oxygen mask across her face. "Later," she said, her voice muffled by the plastic. "Talk, later."

Koboi drifted into a natural sleep, exhausted by even this small exertion. It could be hours before the pixie regained consciousness. After a coma of that length, there was even the risk that Opal would never be quite as smart as she once was.

"Time?" said Merv.

Scant glanced at his moonometer. "Thirty seconds left."

Merv finished cinching the straps exactly as they had been. Pausing only to dab sweat from his brow, he made a second incision with his scalpel, this time in the clone's arm, and inserted the seeker-sleeper. While Scant sealed the cut with a blast of magical sparks, Merv rearranged the cleaning paraphernalia over the trolley's false section.

Scant bobbed impatiently. "Eight seconds, seven. By the gods, this is the last time I break the boss out of a clinic and replace her with a clone."

Merv spun the trolley on its castors, pushing it through the open doorway. "Five . . . four . . ."

Scant did one last check around, running his eyeballs across everything they had touched.

"Three ...two ..."

They were out, pulling the door behind them.

"One ..."

Corporal Grub slumped slightly, then jerked to attention.

"Hey . . . what the? I'm really thirsty. Is anyone else thirsty?"

Merv stuffed the night-vision goggles into the trolley, blinking a bead of sweat from his eyelid. "It's the air in here. I get dehydrated all the time. Terrible headaches."

Grub pinched the bridge of his nose. "Me too. I'm going to write a letter, as soon as the

lights come back.”

Just then the lights did come back, flickering on one after another down the length of the corridor.

“There we go,” grinned Scant. “Panic over. Maybe now they’ll buy us some new circuits, eh, brother?”

Dr. Argon came barrelling down the passageway, almost keeping pace with the flickering lights.

“Your hip is better, then, Jerry?” said Merv.

Argon ignored the pixies, his eyes wide, his breath ragged.

“Corporal Kelp,” he panted. “Koboi, is she? Has she ...”

Grub rolled his eyes. “Calm yourself, doctor. Miss Koboi is still suspended where you left her. Take a look.”

Argon flattened his palms against the wall, first checking the vitals.

“Okay, no change. No change. A two-minute lapse, but that’s okay.”

“I told you,” said Grub. “And while you’re here, I need to talk to you about these headaches I’ve been having.”

Argon brushed him aside. “I need a cotton ball. Scant, do you have any?”

Scant slapped his pockets. “Sorry, Jerry. Not on me.”

“Don’t call me Jerry!” howled Jerbal Argon, ripping the lid from the cleaning trolley.

“There must be cotton balls in here somewhere,” he said, sweat pasting thin hair across his wide gnome’s forehead. “It’s a janitor’s box, for heaven’s sake.” His blunt fingers scrabbled through the trolley’s contents, scraping across the false bottom.

Merv elbowed him out of the way before he could discover the secret compartment or spy screens. “Here we are, doctor,” he said, grabbing a tub of cotton balls. “A month’s supply. Knock yourself out.”

Argon fumbled a single ball from the pack, discarding the rest.

“DNA never lies,” he muttered, punching his code into the keypad. “DNA never lies.”

He rushed into the room and roughly swabbed the inside of the clone’s mouth. The Brill brothers held their breath. They had expected to be out of the clinic before this happened. Argon rolled the cotton ball’s head across the sponge pad on his clipboard. A moment later, Opal Koboi’s name flashed onto the board’s miniplasma screen.

Argon heaved a massive sigh, resting his hands on both knees. He threw the observers a shamefaced grin. “Sorry. I panicked. If we lost Koboi, the clinic would never live it down. I’m just a little paranoid, I suppose. Faces can be altered, but . . .”

“DNA never lies,” said Merv and Scant simultaneously.

Grub reset his video goggles. “I think Dr. Argon needs a little vacation.”

“You’re telling me,” sniggered Merv, rolling the trolley toward the maintenance elevator. “Anyway, we’d better get going, brother. We need to isolate the cause of the power failure.”

Scant followed him down the corridor. “Any idea where the problem could be?”

“I have a hunch. Let’s try the parking lot, or maybe the basement.”

“Whatever you say. After all, you are the older brother.”

“And wiser,” added Merv. “Don’t forget that.”

The pixies continued down the corridor, their brisk banter masking the fact that their knees were shaking and their hearts were battering their rib cages. It wasn’t until they had removed the evidence of their acid bombs, and were well on their way home in the van, that they began to breathe normally again.

Back in the apartment he shared with Scant, Merv unzipped Koboï from her sealed hiding place. Any worries they'd had about Opal's IQ taking a dip immediately vanished. Their employer's eyes were bright and aware.

"Bring me up to speed," she said, climbing shakily from the trolley. Even though her mind was fully functioning, it would take a couple of days in an electromassager to get her muscles back to normal.

Merv helped her onto a low sofa. "Everything is in place. The funds, the surgeon, everything."

Opal drank greedily straight from a jug of core water on the coffee table. "Good, good. And what of my enemies?"

Scant stood beside his brother. They were almost identical except for a slight wideness in Merv's brow. Merv had always been the smart one.

"We have kept tabs on them, as you asked," said Scant.

Opal stopped drinking. "Asked?"

"Instructed," stammered Scant. "Instructed, of course. That's what I meant."

Koboï's eyes narrowed. "I do hope the Brill brothers haven't developed any independent notions since I've been asleep."

Scant stooped slightly, almost bowing. "No, no, Miss Koboï. We live to serve. Only to serve."

"Yes," agreed Opal. "And you live only as long as you do serve. Now, my enemies. They are well and happy, I trust."

"Oh yes. Julius Root goes from strength to strength as LEP Commander. He has been nominated for the Council."

Opal smiled a vicious wolverine's smile. "The Council. Such a long way to fall. And Holly Short?"

"Back on full active duty. Six successful reconnaissance missions since you induced your coma. Her name has been put on the list for promotion to major."

"Major, indeed. Well, the least we can do is to make sure that promotion never comes through. I plan to wreck Holly Short's career, so she dies in disgrace."

"The centaur Foaly is as obnoxious as ever," continued Scant Brill. "I suggest a particularly nasty . . ."

Opal raised a delicate finger, cutting him off. "No. Nothing happens to Foaly just yet. He will be defeated by intellect alone. Twice in my life, someone has outsmarted me. Both times it was Foaly. Just killing him requires no ingenuity. I want him beaten, humiliated, and alone." She clapped her hands in delighted anticipation. "And then I will kill him."

"We have been monitoring Artemis Fowl's communications. Apparently the human youth has spent most of the past year trying to find a certain painting. We have traced the painting to Munich."

"A painting? Really?" Cogwheels turned in Opal's brain. "Well, let's make sure we get to it before he does. Maybe we can add a little something to his work of art."

Scant nodded. "Yes. That's not a problem. I'll go tonight."

Opal stretched out on the sofa like a cat in the sunlight. "Good. This is turning out to be a lovely day. Now, send for the surgeon."

The Brill brothers glanced at each other.

"Miss Koboï?" said Mervall nervously.

"Yes, what is it?"

“The surgeon. This kind of operation cannot be reversed, even by magic. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to think ...”

Opal leaped from the sofa. Her cheeks were crimson with rage. “Think! You’d like me to think about it! What do you imagine I have been doing for the past year? Thinking! Twenty-four hours a day. I don’t care about magic. Magic did not help me to escape, science did. Science will be my magic. Now, no more advice, Merv, or your brother will be an only child. Is that clear?”

Merv was stunned. He had never seen Opal in such a rage. The coma had changed her.

“Yes, Miss Koboi.”

“Now, summon the surgeon.”

“At once, Miss Koboi.”

Opal lay back on the sofa. Soon everything would be right in the world. Her enemies would shortly be dead or discredited. Once those loose ends were tied up, she could get on with her new life. Koboi rubbed the tips of her pointed ears. What would she look like, she wondered, as a human?

CHAPTER 2

THE FAIRY THIEF

Munich, Germany; Present Day

Thieves have their own folklore: stories of ingenious heists and death-defying robberies. One such legend tells of the Egyptian cat burglar Faisal Mahmood, who scaled the dome of St. Peter’s basilica in order to drop in on a visiting bishop and steal his crosier.

Another story concerns confidence woman Red Mary Keneally, who dressed as a duchess and talked her way into the King of England’s coronation. The palace denied the event ever took place, but every now and then a crown turns up at auction that looks a lot like the one in the Tower of London.

Perhaps the most thrilling legend is the tale of the lost Hervé masterpiece. Every primary schoolchild knows that Pascal Hervé was the French Impressionist who painted extraordinarily beautiful pictures of the fairy folk. And every art dealer knows that Hervé’s paintings are second in value only to those of van Gogh himself, commanding price tags of more than fifty million euros.

There are fifteen paintings in the Hervé Fairy Folk series. Ten reside in French museums and five are in private collections. But there are rumors of a sixteenth. Whispers circulate in the upper criminal echelons that another Hervé exists: *The Fairy Thief*, depicting a fairy in the act of stealing a human child. Legend has it that Hervé gave the picture as a gift to a beautiful Turkish girl he met on the Champs-Élysée.

The girl promptly broke Hervé’s heart, and sold the picture to a British tourist for twenty francs. Within weeks, the picture had been stolen from the Englishman’s home. And since that time, it has been lifted from private collections all over the world. Since Hervé painted his masterpiece, it is believed that *The Fairy Thief* has been stolen fifteen times. But what makes these thefts different from the billion others that have been committed during this time is that the first thief decided to keep the picture for himself. And so did all the others.

The Fairy Thief has become something of a trophy for top thieves worldwide. Only a dozen know of its existence, and only a handful know of its whereabouts. The painting is to criminals what the Turner Prize is to artists. Whoever manages to successfully steal the lost

painting is acknowledged as the master thief of his generation. Not many are aware of this challenge, but those who do know matter.

Naturally Artemis Fowl knew of *The Fairy Thief*, and recently he had learned of the painting's whereabouts. It was an irresistible test of his abilities. If he succeeded in stealing the lost master, he would become the youngest thief in history to have done so.

His bodyguard, the giant Eurasian Butler, was not very pleased with his young charge's latest project.

"I don't like this, Artemis," said Butler in his bass gravelly tones. "My instincts tell me it's a trap."

Artemis Fowl inserted batteries in his handheld computer game.

"Of course it's a trap," said the fourteen-year-old Irish boy. "*The Fairy Thief* has been ensnaring thieves for years. That's what makes it interesting."

They were traveling around Munich's Marienplatz in a rented Hummer H2. The military vehicle was not Artemis's style, but it would be consistent with the style of the people they were pretending to be. Artemis sat in the rear, feeling ridiculous, dressed not in his usual dark two-piece suit, but in normal teenager clothing.

"This outfit is preposterous," he said, zipping his tracksuit top. "What is the point of a hood that is not waterproof? And all these logos? I feel like a walking advertisement. And these *jeans* do not fit properly. They are sagging down to my knees."

Butler smiled, glancing in the rearview mirror. "I think you look fine. Juliet would say that you were *bad*."

Juliet, Butler's younger sister, was currently on a tour of the States with a Mexican wrestling troupe, trying to break into the big time. Her ring name was the Jade Princess.

"I certainly feel *bad*," admitted Artemis. "As for these high-top sneakers—how is one supposed to run quickly with soles three inches thick? I feel as though I am on stilts. Honestly, Butler, the second we return to the hotel, I am disposing of this outfit. I miss my suits."

Butler pulled onto Im Tal, where the International Bank was located. "Artemis, if you're not feeling comfortable, perhaps we should postpone this operation?"

Artemis zipped his computer game into a backpack, which already contained a number of typical teenage items. "Absolutely not. This window of opportunity has taken a month to organize."

Three weeks previously, Artemis had made an anonymous donation to the St. Bartleby's School for Young Men, on condition that the third-year boys be taken on a trip to Munich for the European Schools' Fair. The principal had been happy to honor the donor's wishes. And now, while the other boys were viewing various technological marvels at an exhibition in Munich's Olympia Stadium, Artemis was on his way to the International Bank.

As far as Principal Guiney was concerned, Butler was driving a student who was feeling poorly back to his hotel room.

"Crane and Sparrow probably move the painting several times a year. I certainly would. Who knows where it will be in six months?"

Crane and Sparrow were a firm of British lawyers who used their business as a front for an extremely successful burglary and fencing enterprise. Artemis had long suspected them of possessing *The Fairy Thief*. Confirmation had arrived a month earlier, when a private detective who was routinely employed to spy on Crane and Sparrow reported that he had spotted them moving a painting tube to the International Bank. Possibly *The Fairy Thief*.

"I may not have this chance again until I am an adult," continued the Irish youth. "And

there is no question of waiting that long. Franz Herman stole *The Fairy Thief* when he was eighteen years old; I need to beat that record.”

Butler sighed. “Criminal folklore tells us that Herman stole the painting in 1927. He merely snatched a briefcase. There is rather more to contend with today. We must break open a safe-deposit box in one of the world’s most secure banks, in broad daylight.”

Artemis Fowl smiled. “Yes. Many would say that it was impossible.”

“They would,” agreed Butler, slotting the Hummer into a parking space. “Many sane people. Especially for someone on a school tour.”

* * *

They entered the bank through the lobby’s revolving doors in full view of the CCTV. Butler led the way, striding purposefully across the gold-veined marble floor toward an inquiries desk. Artemis trailed behind, bobbing his head to some music on his portable disk player. In fact the disk player was empty. Artemis wore mirrored sunglasses that concealed his eyes but allowed him to scan the bank’s interior unobserved.

The International Bank was famous in certain circles for having the most secure safe-deposit boxes in the world, including Switzerland. It was rumored that if the International Bank’s deposit boxes were cracked open and the contents dumped onto the floor, perhaps one tenth of the world’s wealth would be heaped on the marble. Jewels, bearer bonds, cash, deeds, art. At least half of it stolen from its rightful owners. But Artemis was not interested in any of these objects. Perhaps next time.

Butler stopped at the enquiries desk, casting a broad shadow across the slim-line monitor perched there. The thin man who had been working on the monitor lifted his head to complain, then thought better of it. Butler’s sheer bulk often had that effect on people.

“How can I help you, Herr . . . ?”

“Lee, Colonel Xavier Lee. I wish to open my deposit box,” replied Butler, in fluent German.

“Yes, Colonel. Of course. My name is Bertholt, and I will be assisting you today.” Bertholt opened Colonel Xavier Lee’s file on his computer with one hand, the other twirling a pencil like a mini-baton. “We just need to complete the usual security check. If I may have your passport?”

“Of course,” said Butler, sliding a People’s Republic of China passport across the desk. “I expect nothing less than the most stringent security procedures.”

Bertholt took the passport in his slim fingers, first checking the photograph, then placing it onto a scanner.

“Alfonse,” snapped Butler at Artemis. “Stop fidgeting and stand up straight, son. You slouch so much that sometimes I think you don’t have a spine.”

Bertholt smiled with the insincerity a toddler could have seen through. “Alfonse, nice to meet you.”

“Dude,” said Artemis, with equal hypocrisy.

Butler shook his head. “My son does not communicate well with the rest of the world. I look forward to the day he can join the army. Then we shall see if there is a man beneath all these moods.”

Bertholt nodded sympathetically. “I have a girl. Sixteen years old. She spends more of my money on phone calls in a week than the entire family spends on food.”

“Teenagers, they’re all the same.”

The computer beeped.

“Ah yes, your passport has been cleared. Now all I need is a signature.” Bertholt slid a handwriting tablet across the desk. A digi-pen was attached to the tablet by a length of wire. Butler took it and scrawled his signature across the line. The signature would match. Of course it would. The original writing was Butler’s own, Colonel Xavier Lee being one of a dozen aliases the bodyguard had created over the years. The passport was also authentic, even if the details typed upon it weren’t. Butler had purchased it years previously from a Chinese diplomat’s secretary in Rio de Janeiro.

Once again the computer beeped.

“Good,” said Bertholt. “You are indeed who you say you are. I shall bring you to the deposit-box room. Will Alfonse be accompanying us?”

Butler stood. “Absolutely. If I leave him here, he will probably get himself arrested.”

Bertholt attempted a joke. “Well, if I may say so, Colonel, he’s in the right place.”

“Hilarious, dude,” muttered Artemis. “You should, like, have your own show.”

But Bertholt’s comment was accurate. Armed security men were dotted throughout the building. At the first sign of any impropriety, they would move to strategic points, covering all exits.

Bertholt led the way to a brushed-steel elevator, holding his ID card up to a camera over the door.

The bank official winked at Artemis. “We have a special security system here, young man. It’s all very exciting.”

“I know. I think I’m going to faint,” said Artemis.

“No more attitude, son,” scolded Butler. “Bertholt is simply trying to make conversation.”

Bertholt stayed civil in the face of Artemis’s sarcasm. “Maybe you’d like to work here when you grow up, eh, Alfonse?”

For the first time Artemis smiled sincerely, and for some reason the sight sent shivers down Bertholt’s spine. “Do you know something, Bertholt? I think some of my best work will be in banks.”

The awkward silence that followed was cut short by a voice from a tiny speaker below the camera.

“Yes, Bertholt, we see you. How many?”

“Two,” replied Bertholt. “One key holder and one minor. Coming down to open a box.”

The lift door slid back to reveal a steel cuboid with no buttons or panels, just a camera elevated in one corner. They stepped inside and the elevator was remotely activated. Artemis noticed Bertholt wringing his hands as soon as they began to descend.

“Hey, Bertholt, what’s the problem? It’s only an elevator.”

Bertholt forced a smile. Barely a glint of tooth showed beneath his mustache. “You don’t miss much, do you, Alfonse? I don’t like small spaces. And there are no controls in here, for security reasons. The lift is operated from the desk. If it were to break down, we would be relying on the guards to rescue us. This thing is virtually airtight. What if the guard had a heart attack, or went on a coffee break? We could all . . .” The bank official’s nervous rant was cut off by the hiss of the elevator door. They had arrived at the deposit-box floor.

“Here we are,” said Bertholt, mopping his forehead with a Kleenex. A section of the paper remained trapped in the worry lines of his forehead, and fluttered there like a windsock in the air-conditioner blast. “Safe, you see. Absolutely no need to worry. All is well.” He laughed

nervously. "Shall we?"

A bulky security guard waited for them outside the lift. Artemis noted the side arm on his belt, and the earpiece cord winding along his neck.

"*Willkommen*, Bertholt, you made it in one piece. Again."

Bertholt plucked the strand of tissue from his forehead. "Yes, Kurt, I made it, and don't think the scorn in your voice goes unnoticed."

Kurt sighed mightily, allowing the escaping air to flap his lips. "Please pardon my phobic countryman," he said to Butler. "Everything terrifies him, from spiders to elevators. It's a wonder he ever gets out of bed. Now, if you could stand on the yellow square and raise both arms to shoulder level."

There was a yellow square taped onto the steel floor. Butler stepped onto it, raising his arms. Kurt performed a body search that would have shamed a customs official, before ushering him through a metal detector arch.

"He's clean," he said aloud. The words would be picked up by the microphone on his lapel and relayed to the security booth. "You next, boy," said Kurt. "Same drill."

Artemis complied, slouching onto the square. He raised his arms barely six inches from his sides.

Butler glared at him. "Alfonse! Can't you do what the man says? In the army I would have you cleaning the latrines for this kind of behavior."

Artemis glared back. "Yes, *Colonel*, but we're not in the army here, are we?"

Kurt slipped Artemis's pack from his back and rifled through the contents.

"What's this?" he asked, pulling out a toughened plastic frame.

Artemis took the frame, unfolding it with three deft movements. "It's a scooter, dude. You may have heard of them. Transportation that doesn't pollute the air we breathe."

Kurt snatched back the scooter, spinning the wheels and checking the joints.

Artemis smirked. "Of course, it's also a laser cutter, so I can break into your boxes."

"You're a real smart aleck, boy," snarled Kurt, stuffing the scooter back in the bag. "And what's this?"

Artemis turned on the video game. "It's a game box. They were invented so teenagers wouldn't have to talk to grown-ups."

Kurt glanced at Butler. "He's a gem, sir. I wish I had one just like him." He rattled a ring of keys on Artemis's belt. "And what are these?"

Artemis scratched his head. "Uh . . . keys?"

Kurt ground his teeth audibly. "I know they're keys, boy. What do they open?"

Artemis shrugged. "Stuff. My locker. My scooter lock. A couple of diaries. Stuff."

The security guard examined the keys. They were everyday keys, and wouldn't open a complicated lock. But the bank had a no-key rule. Only safe-deposit box keys were allowed through the metal detector.

"Sorry. The keys stay here." Kurt unclipped the ring and placed the keys in a flat tray. "You can pick them up on your way out."

"Can I go now?"

"Yes," said Kurt. "Please do, but pass the bag through to your father first."

Artemis handed the bag around the metal detector arch to Butler. He passed through himself, setting off the buzzer.

Kurt followed him impatiently. "Do you have anything else metallic on you? A belt buckle? Some coins?"

“Money?” scoffed Artemis. “I wish.”

“What’s setting off the detector, then?” said Kurt, puzzled.

“I think I know,” said Artemis. He hooked a finger inside his top lip, pulling it up. Two metal bands ran across his teeth.

“Braces. That would do it,” said Kurt. “The detector is extremely sensitive.”

Artemis removed his finger from his mouth. “Should I take these out too? Rip them from my teeth?”

Kurt took the suggestion at face value. “No. I think we’re safe enough. Just go on through. But behave yourself in there. It’s a vault, not a playground.” Kurt paused, pointing to a camera above their heads. “Remember, I’ll be watching.”

“Watch all you like,” said Artemis brazenly.

“Oh, I will, boy. You so much as spit on one of those doors, and I’ll eject you from the premises. Forcibly.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Kurt,” said Bertholt. “Don’t be so theatrical. Those are not network television cameras, you know.”

Bertholt ushered them through to the vault door. “I apologize for Kurt. He failed the special-forces exam and ended up here. Sometimes I think he would love someone to rob the place, just so he could see some action.”

The door was a circular slab of steel, at least sixteen feet in diameter. In spite of its size, the door swung easily at Bertholt’s touch.

“Perfectly balanced,” explained the bank official. “A child could open it, until five thirty when it shuts for the night. Naturally the vault is time locked. Nobody can open the door until eight thirty A.M. Not even the bank president.”

Inside the vault were rows and rows of steel deposit boxes of all shapes and sizes. Each box had a single rectangular keyhole on its face, surrounded by a fiber-optic light. At the moment all the lights glowed red.

Bertholt took a key from his pocket; it was attached to his belt by a woven steel cable. “Of course the key’s shape is not the only important thing,” he said, inserting the key into a master keyhole. “The locks are also operated by microchip.”

Butler took a similar key from his wallet. “Are we ready?”

“Whenever you are, sir.”

Butler ran his fingers over several boxes until he reached number seven hundred. He inserted his key in the keyhole. “Ready.”

“Very well, sir. On my mark. Three, two, one. Turn.”

Both men turned their keys simultaneously. The *master key* safeguard prevented a thief opening a box with a single key. If the two keys were not turned within one second of each other, the box would not open.

The light around both keys switched from red to green. The door on Butler’s safe-deposit box popped open.

“Thank you, Bertholt,” said Butler, reaching into the box.

“Of course, sir,” replied Bertholt, almost bowing. “I’ll be right outside. Even with the camera, there is a three-minute inspection rule. So I’ll see you in one hundred and eighty seconds.”

Once the bank official had gone, Artemis shot his bodyguard a quizzical look.

“Alfonse?” he said out of the side of his mouth. “I don’t remember deciding on a name for my character.”

Butler set the stopwatch on his chronograph. "I was improvising, Artemis. I thought the situation required it. And if I may say so, you make a very convincing obnoxious teenager."

"Thank you, old friend. I try."

Butler removed an architect's drawing from his deposit box, unfolding the document until it was almost six feet square. He held it at arm's length, apparently studying the design inked onto the paper.

Artemis glanced upward at the ceiling-mounted camera. "Raise your arms another two inches and take a step to your left."

Butler did so casually, covering the movements with a cough, and a shake of the parchment.

"Good. Perfect. Stay right there."

When Butler had rented the box on his last visit, he'd taken numerous photographs of the vault with a button camera. Artemis had used these photos to render a digital reconstruction of the room. According to his calculations, Butler's present position provided Artemis with a thirty-three-foot box of cover. In that area his movements would be hidden by the drawing. At the moment, only his trainers could be seen by the security guards.

Artemis rested his back against a wall of security boxes, between two steel benches. He braced both arms against the benches, levering himself out of the oversized trainers. Carefully, the boy slid onto the bench.

"Keep your head down," advised Butler.

Artemis rooted through his backpack for the video cube. Though the box did actually play a computer game, its primary function was an X-ray panel with real-time viewing. The X-ray panels were in common usage among the upper criminal echelons, and it had been a relatively simple matter for Artemis to disguise one as a teenager's toy.

Artemis activated the X-ray, sliding it across the door of the deposit box beside Butler's. The bodyguard had rented his box two days after Crane and Sparrow. It stood to reason that the boxes would be close to one another, unless Crane and Sparrow had requested a specific number. In that case it was back to the drawing board. Artemis reckoned that this first attempt to steal *The Fairy Thief* had a forty percent chance of success. These were not ideal odds, but he had no option but to go ahead. At the very least, he would learn more about the bank's security.

The game cube's small screen revealed that the first box was stuffed with currency.

"Negative," said Artemis. "Cash only."

Butler raised an eyebrow. "You know what they say; you can never have too much cash."

Artemis had already moved on to the next box. "Not today, old friend. But let's keep up the rental on our box, in case we ever need to return."

The next box contained legal papers tied together with ribbons. The one after that was piled high with loose diamonds in a tray. Artemis struck gold on the fourth box. Figuratively speaking. Inside the deposit box was a long tube containing a rolled-up canvas.

"I think we have it, Butler. I think this could be it."

"Time enough to get excited when the painting is hanging on the wall in Fowl Manor. Hurry up, Artemis, my arms are beginning to ache."

Artemis steadied himself. Of course Butler was right. They were still a long way from possessing *The Fairy Thief*, if indeed this painting was Hervé's lost masterpiece. It could just as easily be some proud grandfather's crayon drawing of a helicopter.

Artemis moved the X-ray machine down to the bottom of the box. There were no manufacturer's markings on the door, but often craftsmen were proud and could not resist

placing a signature somewhere. Even if nobody knew it was there but them. Artemis searched for maybe twenty seconds before he found what he was looking for. Inside the door itself, on the rear panel was engraved the word *Blokken*.

“Blokken,” said the boy triumphantly. “We were right.”

There were only six firms in the world capable of constructing deposit boxes of this quality. Artemis had hacked their computers and found International Bank on the *Blokken* client list. *Blokken* was a small family company in Vienna that also made boxes for several banks in Geneva and the Cayman Islands. Butler had paid their workshop a little visit and stolen two master keys. Of course, the keys were metal, and would not escape the detector arch, unless for some reason metal had been allowed through.

Artemis reached two fingers into his mouth, dislodging the brace from his upper teeth. Behind the brace itself was a plastic retainer, and clipped to that were two keys. The master keys.

Artemis rotated his jaw for a few seconds. “That feels better,” he said. “I thought I was going to gag.”

The next problem was one of distance. There were eight feet between the deposit box and the master keyhole by the door. Not only was it impossible for one person to open the door unassisted, but whoever stood by the master keyhole would be visible to the security guards.

Artemis pulled his scooter from the backpack. He yanked one pin from its socket, detaching the steering column from the footrest. This was no ordinary scooter. An engineer friend of Butler’s had constructed it from very specific blueprints. The footrest was completely regular, but the steering column turned into a telescope at the touch of a spring-release button. Artemis unscrewed one handgrip, reattaching it at the other end of the column. There was a slit in the end of each grip, into which Artemis screwed a master key. Now all he had to do was insert both keys into their corresponding keyholes and turn them simultaneously.

Artemis slotted one key into Crane and Sparrow’s box.

“Ready?” he asked Butler.

“Yes,” replied his bodyguard. “Don’t go one step farther than you have to.”

“Three, two, one. Go.”

Artemis pressed the spring-release button on the steering column. He shuffled across the bench, pulling the telescoping pole behind him. As the boy moved, Butler swiveled his trunk so that Artemis remained shielded by the blueprint. He moved the plan just far enough to cover the master keyhole, without exposing Artemis’s legless shoes. However, the target box, complete with telescoping pole, was visible for the time it took Artemis to insert the second key.

The master keyhole was three feet beyond the end of the steel bench. Artemis leaned as far as he could without losing his balance, slotting the key into its hole. It fit snugly. Artemis shuffled back quickly. Now Butler could once again mask Crane and Sparrow’s box. The entire plan hinged on the assumption that the guards would be concentrating on Butler, and not notice a slim pole extending toward the master keyhole. It would help that the pole was precisely the same color as the safe-deposit boxes.

Artemis returned to the original box, twisting the handgrip. A pulley and cable system inside the pole twisted the other handgrip simultaneously. Both locks flashed green. Crane and Sparrow’s box popped open. Artemis felt a moment of satisfaction. His contraption had worked. Then again, there was no reason it shouldn’t: all the laws of physics had been obeyed. Amazing how the tightest of electronic security could be defeated by a pole, a pulley, and a brace.

“Artemis,” groaned Butler. “Keeping my arms up is becoming uncomfortable. So, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Artemis cut short his mental celebration. They were not out of the vault yet. He turned the grips back to their original position, then yanked the bar toward him. Both keys popped from their holes. With the touch of a button, the pole snapped back to its original length. Artemis did not reassemble the scooter just yet. The pole may be needed to search other boxes.

Artemis studied the locker with the X-ray panel before opening the door any wider. He was searching for any wires or circuits that might trigger secondary alarms. There was one. A circuit breaker attached to a portable Klaxon. It would be extremely embarrassing for any thief if the authorities were alerted by the raucous wailing of a foghorn. Artemis smiled. It seemed as though Crane and Sparrow had a sense of humor. Maybe he would employ them as his lawyers.

Artemis unhooked the headphones from around his neck, popping off the earpieces. Once the wire inside was exposed, he twisted a length around each side of the breaker. Now he could safely pull apart the breaker without opening the circuit. Artemis pulled. The Klaxon remained silent.

At last, the box lay open before him. Inside, a single tube stood propped against the rear wall. The tube was fashioned from Perspex, and contained a rolled-up canvas. Artemis removed the tube and held it up to the light. For several seconds, he studied the painting through the transparent plastic. He could not risk opening the tube until they were safely back in the hotel. A hasty job now could cause accidental damage to the painting. He had waited years to obtain *The Fairy Thief*; he could wait a few more hours.

“The brushwork is unmistakable,” he said, closing the box. “Strong strokes. Thick blocks of light. It’s either Hervé, or a brilliant copy. I do believe we’ve done it, Butler, but I can’t be sure without X-ray and paint analysis.”

“Good,” said the bodyguard, glancing at his watch. “That can be done at the hotel. Pack up and let’s get out of here.”

Artemis shoved the cylinder into his backpack, along with the reassembled scooter. He clipped the keys to his retainer, slotting the brace over his teeth.

The vault door slid back just as the Irish youth lowered himself into his trainers. Bertholt’s head appeared in the gap.

“Everything all right in here?” asked the bank official.

Butler folded the drawing, slotting it into his pocket.

“Fine, Bertholt. Excellent, in fact. You may escort us to the main level.”

Bertholt bowed slightly. “Of course. Follow me.”

Artemis was back in the role of argumentative teenager. “Thanks so much, Berty. This has been a real blast. I just love spending my holidays in banks, looking at papers.”

All credit to Bertholt. His smile never wavered.

Kurt was waiting for them by the X-ray arch, arms folded across a chest the size of a rhino’s. He waited until Butler had gone past, then tapped Artemis’s shoulder.

“You think you’re really smart, don’t you, boy?” he said, grinning.

Artemis grinned back. “Compared to you? Definitely.”

Kurt bent over, hands on knees, until his eyes were level with Artemis’s. “I was watching you from the security booth. You didn’t do a thing. Your kind never does.”

“How do you know?” asked Artemis. “I could have been breaking into those safe-deposit boxes.”

“I know all right. I know because I could see your feet the whole time. You barely moved an inch.”

Artemis grabbed his ring of keys from the tray and ran after Butler to make the lift. “You

win this time. But I'll be back."

Kurt cupped a hand around his mouth. "Bring it on," he shouted. "I'll be waiting."

CHAPTER 3 ***NEARLY DEPARTED***

Police Plaza, Haven City; The Lower Elements

Captain Holly Short was up for a promotion. It was the career turnaround of the century. Less than a year had passed since she had been the subject of two internal affairs inquiries, but now, after six successful missions, Holly was the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance squad's golden fairy. The Council would soon meet to decide whether or not she would be the first female major in LEPrecon's history. And to tell the truth, the prospect did not appeal to her one bit. Majors rarely got to strap on a set of wings and fly between land and stars. Instead, they spent their time sending junior officers topside on missions. Holly had made up her mind to turn down the promotion if it were offered to her. She could live with a smaller paycheck if it meant she could still see the surface on a regular basis.

Holly decided it would be wise to tell Commander Julius Root what she planned to do. After all, it was Root who had stood by her through the inquiries, and it was Root who had recommended her for promotion in the first place. The commander would not take the news well. He never took any kind of news well: even good news was received with a gruff thank-you and a slammed door.

Holly stood outside Root's office on that morning, working up the courage to knock. And even though, at three feet exactly, she was just below the average fairy height, Holly was glad of the half inch granted by her spiky auburn hair. Before she could knock, the door was yanked open, and Root's rosy-cheeked face appeared in the doorway.

"Captain Short!" he roared, his gray buzz cut quivering. "Get in here!" Then he noticed Holly standing beside the door. "Oh, there you are. Come in. We have a puzzle that needs solving. It involves one of our goblin friends."

Holly followed Root into the office. Foaly, the LEP's technical adviser, was already there, close enough to the wall plasma screen to singe his nose hairs.

"Howler's Peak video," explained Root. "General Scalene escaped."

"Escaped?" echoed Holly. "Do we know how?"

Foaly snapped his fingers. "D'Arvit! That's what we should be thinking about, instead of standing around here playing *I Spy*."

"We don't have time for the usual sarcastic small talk, Foaly," snapped Root, his complexion deepening to burgundy. "This is a PR disaster. Scalene is public enemy number two, second only to Opal Koboi herself. If the journos get wind of this, we'll be the laughingstock of Haven. Not to mention the fact that Scalene could round up a few of his goblin buddies and reactivate the triad."

Holly crossed to the screen, elbowing Foaly's hindquarters out of the way. Her little talk with Commander Root could wait. There was police work to be done. "What are we looking at?"

Foaly highlighted a section of the screen with a laser pointer. "Howler's Peak, goblin correctional facility. Camera eighty-six."

"Which shows?"

"The visiting room. Scalene went in, but he never came out."

Holly scanned the camera list. “No camera in the room itself?”

Root coughed, or it may have been an actual growl. “No. According to the third Atlantis convention on fairy rights, detainees are entitled to privacy in the visiting room.”

“So we don’t know what went on in there?”

“Not as such, no.”

“What genius designed this system, anyway?”

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Root chuckled. He never could resist needling the smug centaur.

“Our horsey friend here designed the Howler’s Peak automated security system all on his own.”

Foaly pouted, and when a centaur pouts, his bottom lip almost reaches his chin. “It’s not the system. The system is foolproof. Every prisoner has the standard subcutaneous seeker-sleeper in his head. Even if a goblin manages to miraculously escape, we can remotely knock them out, then pick him up.”

Holly raised her palms. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that the seeker-sleeper is not broadcasting. Or, if it is, we’re not picking up the signal.”

“That *is* a problem.”

Root lit a noxious fungal cigar. The smoke was instantly whipped away by an air recycler on his desk. “Major Kelp is out with a mobile unit, trying to get a fix on a signal.”

Trouble Kelp had recently been promoted to Root’s second in command. He was not the kind of officer who liked sitting behind a desk, unlike his little brother, Corporal Grub Kelp, who would like nothing better than to be stuck behind a nice safe desk for the remainder of his career. If Holly was forced into promotion, she hoped she could be half the major that Trouble was.

Holly returned her attention to the plasma screen. “So, who was visiting General Scalene?”

“One of his thousand nephews. A goblin by the name of Boohn. Apparently that means *of noble brow* in Goblin cant.”

“I remember him,” said Holly. “Boohn. Customs and excise think he’s one of the goblins behind the B’wa Kell smuggling operation. There’s nothing noble about him.”

Foaly opened a folder on the plasma screen with his laser pointer. “Here’s the visitor list. Boohn checks in at seven fifty, Lower Elements mean time. At least I can show you that on video.”

A grainy screen showed a bulky goblin in the prison’s access corridor, nervously licking his eyeballs while the security laser scanned him. Once it was confirmed that Boohn wasn’t trying to smuggle anything in, the visitors’ door popped open.

Foaly scrolled down the list. “And look here. He checks out at eight fifteen.”

Boohn left swiftly, obviously uncomfortable in the facility. The parking lot camera showed him reverting to all fours for a dash to his car.

Holly scanned the list carefully. “So you’re saying that Boohn checked out at eight fifteen?”

“I just said that didn’t I, Holly?” replied Foaly testily. “I’ll say it again slowly. Eight fifteen.”

Holly snatched the laser pointer. “Well, if that’s true, how did he manage to check out again at eight twenty?”

It was true. Eight lines down on the list, Boohn’s name popped up again.

“I saw that already. It’s a glitch,” muttered Foaly. “That’s all. He couldn’t leave twice. It’s not possible. We get that sometimes, a bug, nothing more.”

“Unless it wasn’t him the second time.”

The centaur folded his arms defensively. “Don’t you think I thought of that? Every one who enters or leaves Howler’s Peak is scanned a dozen times. We take at least eighty facial points of reference with each scan. If the computer says Boohn, then that’s who it was. There’s no way a goblin beat my system. They barely have enough brainpower to walk and talk at the same time.”

Holly used the pointer to review the entry video of Boohn. She enlarged his head, using a photo-manipulation program to sharpen the image.

“What are you looking for?” asked Root.

“I don’t know, Commander. Something. Anything.”

It took a few minutes, but finally Holly got it. She knew immediately that she was right. Her intuition was buzzing like a swarm of bees at the base of her neck. “Look here,” she said, enlarging Boohn’s brow. “A scale blister. This goblin is shedding.”

“So?” said Foaly grumpily.

Holly reopened Boohn’s exit file. “Now look. No blister.”

“So he burst the blister. Big deal.”

“No. It’s more than that. Going in, Boohn’s skin was almost gray. Now he’s bright green. He even has a camouflage pattern on his back.”

Foaly snorted. “A lot of good camouflage is in the city.”

“What’s your point, Captain?” asked Root, stubbing out his cigar.

“Boohn shed his skin in the visitors’ room. So where’s the skin?”

There was silence for a long moment as the others absorbed the implications of this question.

“Would it work?” asked Root urgently.

Foaly was almost dumbstruck. “By the gods, I think it would.”

The centaur pulled out a keyboard, his thick fingers flying across the Gnommish letters. A new video box appeared on the screen. In this box, another goblin was leaving the room. It looked a lot like Boohn. A lot, but not exactly. Something wasn’t quite right. Foaly zoomed in on the goblin’s head. At high magnification it was clear that the goblin’s skin was ill-fitting. Patches were missing altogether, and the goblin seemed to be holding folds together across his waist.

“He did it. I can’t believe it.”

“This was all planned,” said Holly. “This was no opportunistic act. Boohn waits until he’s shedding. Then he visits his uncle and they peel off his skin. General Scalene puts on the skin and just walks out the front door, fooling all your scanners on the way. When Boohn’s name shows up again, you think it’s a glitch. Simple, but completely ingenious.”

Foaly collapsed into a specially designed office chair. “This is incredible. Can goblins do that?”

“Are you kidding?” said Root. “A good goblin seamstress can peel a skin without a single tear. That’s what they make their clothes from, when they bother wearing any.”

“I know that. I meant, could goblins think of this all on their own. I don’t think so. We need to catch Scalene and find out who planned this.”

Foaly dialed a connection to the Koboi-cam in the Argon clinic. “I’m going to check that Opal Koboi is still under. This sort of thing is just her style.” A minute later, he swiveled to face Root. “Nope. Still in dreamland. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. I’d hate to have Opal back in

circulation, but at least we'd know what we were up against."

A thought struck Holly, draining the blood from her face. "You don't think it could be him, do you? It couldn't be Artemis Fowl?"

"Definitely not," said Foaly. "It's not the Mud Boy. Impossible."

Root wasn't convinced. "I wouldn't be throwing that word around so much, if I were you. Holly, as soon as we catch Scalene, I want you to sign out a surveillance pack and spend a couple of days on the Mud Boy's trail. See what he's up to. Just in case."

"Yes, sir."

"And you, Foaly. I'm authorizing a surveillance upgrade. Whatever you need. I want to hear every call Artemis makes, and read every letter he sends."

"But, Julius. I supervised his mind wipe myself. It was a sweet job. I scooped out his fairy memories cleaner than a goblin sucking a snail out of its shell. If we were to turn up at Artemis's front door dancing the cancan, he still wouldn't remember us. It would take some kind of planted trigger to initiate even partial recall."

Root did not appreciate being argued with. "One, don't call me Julius. Two, do what I say, horsey boy, or I'll have your budget slashed. And three, what in Frond's name is the cancan?"

Foaly rolled his eyes. "Forget it. I'll organize the upgrades."

"Wise move," said Root, plucking a vibrating phone from his belt. He listened for several seconds, grunting affirmatives into the speaker.

"Forget Fowl for the moment," he said, closing the phone. "Trouble has located General Scalene. He's in E37. Holly, you're with me. Foaly, you follow us in the tech shuttle. Apparently the general wants to talk."

Haven City was waking up for morning trade. Although to call it *morning* was a bit misleading, as there was only artificial light this far underground. By human standards, Haven was barely more than a village, having fewer than ten thousand inhabitants. But in fairy terms, Haven was the largest metropolis since the original Atlantis, most of which lay buried beneath a three-story shuttle dock in the new Atlantis.

Commander Root's LEP cruiser cut through the rush-hour traffic, its magnetic field automatically shunting other vehicles out of the way into slots in the slow lane. Root and Holly sat in the back, wishing the journey away. This situation was becoming stranger by the minute. First of all, Scalene escapes, and now his locator shows up and he wants to talk to Commander Root.

"What do you make of this?" asked Root eventually. One of the reasons he made such a fine commander was that he respected his officers' opinions.

"I don't know. It could be a trap. Whatever happens, you can't go in there alone."

Root nodded. "I know. Even I am not that stubborn. Anyway, Trouble will probably have the situation secured by the time I get there. He doesn't like waiting around for the brass to arrive. Like someone else I know, eh, Holly?"

Holly half grinned, half grimaced. She had been reprimanded more than once for ignoring the order to wait for reinforcements.

Root raised the soundproof barrier between them and the driver.

"We need to talk, Holly. About the major thing."

Holly looked her superior in the eyes. There was a touch of sadness in them.

"I didn't get it," she blurted, unable to hide her relief.

"No. No, you did get it. Or you will. The official announcement is tomorrow. The first

female major in Recon history. Quite an achievement.”

“But, Commander, I don’t think that . . .”

Root silenced her with a wave of his finger. “I want to tell you something, Holly. About my career. It’s actually a metaphor for *your* career, so listen carefully and see if you can figure it out. Many years ago, when you were still wearing one-piece baby suits with padded backsides, I was a hotshot Recon jock. I loved the smell of fresh air. Every moment I spent in the moonlight was a golden moment.”

Holly had no trouble putting herself in the commander’s shoes. She felt exactly the same way about her own surface trips.

“So I did my job as well as I could—a little bit too well, as it happened. One day I went and got myself promoted.”

Root clamped a purifier globe around the end of a cigar so the smell would not stink up the car. It was a rare gesture.

“Major Julius Root. It was the last thing I wanted, so I marched in to my commander’s office and told him so. ‘I’m a field fairy,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to sit behind a desk filling out e-forms.’ Believe it or not, I got quite agitated.”

Holly tried to look amazed, but couldn’t pull it off. The commander spent most of his time in an agitated red-faced state, which explained his nickname, Beetroot.

“But my commander said something that changed my mind. Do you want to know what that was?”

Root plowed on with his story without waiting for an answer. “My commander said; ‘Julius, this promotion is not for you; it’s for the People.’” Root raised one eyebrow. “Do you see what I’m getting at?”

Holly knew what he meant. It was the flaw in her argument.

Root placed a hand on her shoulder. “The People need good officers, Holly. They need fairies like you to protect them from the Mud Men. Would I prefer to be zipping around under the stars with the wind in my nostrils? Yes. Would I do as much good? No.”

Root paused to suck deeply on his cigar, the glow illuminated the purifier globe. “You’re a good Recon officer, Holly. One of the best I’ve seen. A bit impulsive at times, not much respect for authority, but an intuitive officer, nonetheless. I wouldn’t dream of taking you off the front lines if I didn’t think you could serve the LEP better belowground. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Commander,” said Holly glumly. He was right, even if her selfish side wasn’t ready to accept it just yet. At least she had the Fowl surveillance to look forward to before her new job anchored her in the lower elements.

“There is a perk to being a major,” said Root.

“Sometimes, just to relieve the boredom, you can give yourself an assignment. Something on the surface. In Hawaii, maybe, or New Zealand. Look at Trouble Kelp. He’s a new breed of major, more hands-on. Maybe that’s what the LEP needs.”

Holly knew that the commander was trying to soften the blow. As soon as the major’s acorns were on her lapel, she wouldn’t get aboveground as much as she did now. If she was lucky.

“I’m putting my neck on the block here, Holly, recommending you for major. Your career so far has been, eventful, to say the least. If you intend to turn the promotion down, tell me now and I’ll withdraw your name.”

Last chance, thought Holly. Now or never.

“No,” she said. “I won’t turn it down. How could I? Who knows when the next Artemis

Fowl will turn up?”

In Holly’s ears, her voice sounded distant, as though someone else were speaking. She imagined the bells of lifelong boredom clanging behind her every word. A desk job. She had a desk job.

Root patted her on the shoulder, his huge hand knocking the air from her lungs. “Cheer up, Captain. There is life belowground, you know.”

“I know,” Holly said with an utter lack of conviction.

The police cruiser pulled in beside E37. Root opened the car door, began to disembark, then stopped.

“If it makes any difference,” he said quietly, almost awkwardly, “I’m proud of you, Holly.” And he was gone, out the door and into the throng of LEP officers training their weapons on the chute entrance.

It does make a difference, thought Holly, watching the commander instantly take command of the situation. A big difference.

The chutes were natural magma vents that stretched from the earth’s core to the planet’s surface. Most emerged under water, supplying warm streams that nurtured deep-sea life, but some filtered their gasses through the network of cracks and fissures that riddled the dry land surface. The LEP used the power of magma flares to propel their officers to the surface in titanium eggs. A more leisurely shuttle trip could be taken in a dormant chute. E37 emerged in downtown Paris, and until recently, had been the chute used by goblins in their smuggling operations. Closed to the public for many years, the chute’s terminal had fallen into disrepair. Currently, E37’s only occupants were the members of a movie company that was making a TV film about the B’wa Kell rebellion. Holly was being portrayed by three-time AMP winner, Skylar Peat, and Artemis Fowl was to be completely computer generated.

When Holly and Root arrived, Major Trouble Kelp had three squads of tactical LEP arranged around the terminal’s entrance.

“Fill me in, Major,” ordered Root.

Kelp pointed to the entrance. “We have one way in, and no way out. All the secondary entrances have long since subsided, so if Scalene is in there, he has to go through us to go home.”

“Are we sure he’s there?”

“No,” admitted Major Kelp. “We picked up his signal. But whoever helped him to escape could have sliced open his head and removed the transmitter. All we know for sure is that someone is playing games with us. I sent in a couple of my best Recon sprites and they came back with this.” Trouble handed them a sound wafer. The wafers were the size of a thumbnail and were generally used to record short birthday greetings. This one was in the shape of a birthday cake. Root closed his fingers around the wafer. The heat from his hand would power its microcircuits.

A sibilant voice issued from the tiny speaker, made even more reptilian by the cheap wiring.

“Root,” said the voice. “I would speak to you. I would tell you a great secret. Bring the female, Holly Short. Two only, no more. Any more, and many will die. My comrades will see to it . . .” The message ended with a traditional birthday jingle, its cheeriness at odds with the message.

Root scowled. “Goblins. Drama queens, the lot of them.”

“It’s a trap, Commander,” said Holly without hesitation.

“We were the ones at Kobo Labs a year ago. The goblins hold us responsible for the rebellion’s failure. If we go in there, who knows what’s waiting for us.”

Root nodded approvingly. “Now you’re thinking like a major. We’re not expendable. So what are our options, Trouble?”

“If you don’t go in, many will die. If you do, you might.”

“Not a nice set of options. Don’t you have anything good to tell me?”

Trouble lowered his helmet’s visor, consulting a mini-screen on the Perspex. “We managed to get the terminal’s security scanners back online and ran substance and thermal scans. We found a single heat source in the access tunnel, so Scalene is alone, if it’s him. Whatever he’s doing in there, he doesn’t have any known form of weaponry or explosives. Just a few beetle bars and some good old H₂O.”

“Any magma flares due?” asked Holly.

Trouble ran his index finger along a pad on his left glove, scrolling down the screen on his visor. “Nothing for a couple of months. That chute is intermittent. So Scalene is not planning to bake you.”

Root’s cheeks glowed like two heating coils. “D’Arvit,” he swore. “I thought our goblin troubles were over. I’m tempted just to send in tactical and take a chance that Scalene is bluffing.”

“That would be my advice,” said Trouble. “He doesn’t have anything in there that could harm you. Give me five fairies, and we’ll have Scalene in a wagon before he knows he’s been arrested.”

“I take it the sleeper half of the seeker-sleeper is not working?” said Holly.

Trouble shrugged. “We have to suppose it’s not. The seeker-sleeper didn’t function until now, and when we got here the wafer was left out for us. Scalene knew we were coming. He even left a message.”

Root punched his palm with a fist. “I have to go in. There’s no immediate danger inside, and we can’t assume that Scalene hasn’t come up with a way to carry out his threat. I don’t have a choice, not really. I won’t order you to come with me, Captain Short.”

Holly felt her stomach lurch, but she swallowed the fear. The Commander was right. There was no other way. This was what being an LEP officer was all about. Protecting the People.

“You don’t have to order me, Commander. I volunteer.”

“Good. Now, Trouble, let Foaly and his shuttle through the barricade. We may have to go in, but we don’t have to go in unarmed.”

Foaly had more weaponry crammed into the back of a single shuttle than most human police forces had in their entire arsenal. Every inch of wall space had a power cable screwed into it or a rifle dangling from a hook. The centaur sat in the center, fine-tuning a Neutrino handgun. He tossed it to Holly as she entered the van.

She caught it deftly. “Hey, careful with that.”

Foaly snickered. “Don’t worry. The trigger hasn’t been coded yet. Nobody can fire this weapon until its computer registers an owner. Even if this weapon did fall into goblin hands, it would be useless to them. One of my latest developments. After the B’wa Kell rebellion, I thought it was time to upgrade our security.”

Holly wrapped her fingers around the pistol’s grip. A red scanner light ran the length of the plastic butt, then switched to green.

“That’s it. You’re the owner. From now on that Neutrino 3000 is a one-female gun.”

Holly hefted the transparent gun in her fist. "It's too light. I prefer the 2000."

Foaly brought the gun's specifications up on a wall screen. "It's light, but you'll get used to it. On the plus side, there are no metal parts. It's powered by kinetics, the motion of your body, with a backup mini-nuke cell. Naturally it's linked to a targeting system in your helmet. The casing is virtually impregnable, and if I do say so myself, it's a cool piece of hardware."

Foaly passed a larger version of the gun to Root. "Every shot is registered on the LEP computer, so we can tell who fired, when they fired, and in what direction. That should save internal affairs a lot of computer time." He winked at Holly. "Something you'll be glad to hear."

Holly leered back at the centaur. She was well known to IA. They had already conducted two inquiries into her professional conduct, and would just love the opportunity to conduct a third. The one good thing about being promoted would be the looks on their faces when the commander pinned those major's acorns to her lapel.

Root holstered his weapon. "Okay. Now we can shoot. But what if we get shot?"

"You won't get shot," insisted Foaly. "I've hacked into the terminal scanners, I've planted a couple of sensors of my own, too. There's nothing in there that can harm you. Worst-case scenario, you trip over your own feet and get a sprained ankle."

Root's complexion reddened all the way down his neck. "Foaly, do I have to remind you that your sensors have been fooled before, in this very terminal, if I remember correctly."

"Okay, okay. Take it easy, Commander," said Foaly under his breath. "I haven't forgotten about last year. How could I with Holly reminding me every five minutes?"

The centaur hefted two sealed suitcases onto a workbench. He keyed in a number sequence on their security pads and popped the lids. "These are the next-generation Recon suits. I was planning to unveil them at the LEP conference next month, but with a real-live commander going into action, you better have them today."

Holly pulled a jumpsuit from the case. It glittered briefly, then turned the color of the van walls.

"The fabric is actually woven from cam-foil, so you are virtually hidden all the time. It saves you using your magical shield," explained Foaly. "Of course the function can be turned off. The wings are built into this suit. A completely retractable whisper design, a brand-new concept in wing construction. They take their power from a cell on your belt, and of course each wing is coated with mini-solars for aboveground flights. The suits also have their own pressure equalizers; now you can go directly from one environment to another without getting the bends."

Root held the second suit before him. "These must cost a fortune."

Foaly nodded. "You have no idea. Half of my research budget for last year went to developing those suits. They won't replace the old suit for five years at least. Those two are the only operational models we have, so I would appreciate getting them back. They are shockproof, fire resistant, invisible to radar, and relay a continuous stream of diagnostic information back to Police Plaza. The current LEP helmet sends us basic vitals data, but the new suit sends a second stream of information that can tell us if your arteries are blocked, diagnose fractured bones, and even detect dry skin. It's a flying clinic. There's even a bulletproof plate on the chest, in case a human shoots at you."

Holly held the suit before a green plasma screen. The cam-foil instantly turned emerald.

"I like it," she said. "Green is my color."

Trouble Kelp had commandeered spotlights left on-site by the movie company and directed them into the shuttleport's lower level. The stark light picked up every floating speck of dust, giving the entire departures area an underwater feel. Commander Root and Captain Short

edged into the room, weapons drawn and visors down.

“What do you think of the suit?” asked Holly, automatically keeping track of the various displays on the inside of her visor. LEP trainees often had difficulty developing the double focus needed to watch the terrain and their helmet screens. This often resulted in an action known as *filling the vase*, which was how LEP officers referred to throwing up in one’s helmet.

“Not bad,” replied Root. “Light as a feather, and you wouldn’t even know you were wearing wings. Don’t tell Foaly I said that; his head is swelled enough as it is.”

“No need to tell me, Commander,” said Foaly’s voice in his earpiece. The speakers were a new gel-vibration variety, and it sounded as though the centaur was in the helmet with him. “I’m with you every step of the way, from the safety of the shuttle, of course.”

“Of course,” said Root dourly.

The pair advanced cautiously past a line of check-in booths. Foaly had assured them that there was no possible danger in this area of the terminal, but the centaur had been wrong before. And mistakes in the field cost lives.

The film company had decided that the actual dirt in the terminal was not authentic enough, and so had sprayed piles of gray foam in various corners. They had even added a doll’s head to one mound. A poignant touch, or so they thought. The walls and escalator were blackened with fake laser burns.

“Quite a shooting match,” said Root, grinning.

“Slightly exaggerated. I doubt if half a dozen shots were fired.”

They proceeded through the embarkation area into the docking zone. The original shuttle used by the goblins in their smuggling runs had been resurrected and lay in the docking bay. The shuttle had been painted gloss black to make it seem more menacing, and a goblinessque decorated prow had been added to its nose.

“How far?” said Root into his mike.

“I’m transferring the thermal signature to your helmets,” replied Foaly.

Seconds later a schematic appeared in their visors. The plan was slightly confusing, as, in effect, they were looking down on themselves. There were three heat sources in the building. Two were close together, moving slowly toward the chute itself: Holly and the commander. The third figure was stationary in the access tunnel. Inches past the third figure, the thermoscan was whited out by the ambient heat from E37.

They reached the blast doors: seven feet of solid steel that separated the access tunnel from the rest of the terminal. Shuttles and eggs would glide in on a magnetized rail, to be dropped into the chute itself. The doors were sealed.

“Can you open these remotely, Foaly?”

“But of course, Commander. I have managed, quite ingeniously, to marry my operating system with the terminal’s old computers. That wasn’t as easy as it sounds . . .”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said the commander, cutting Foaly off. “Just push the button, before I come out there and push it with your face.”

“Some things never change,” muttered Foaly, pushing the button.

The access tunnel smelled like a blast furnace. Ancient swirls of melted ore hung from the roof, and the ground underfoot was cracked and treacherous. Each footfall punctured a crust of soot, leaving a trail of deep footprints. There was another set of footprints leading to the shadowy figure huddled on the ground a few feet from the chute itself.

“There,” said Root.

“Got him,” said Holly, resting the bull’s-eye of her laser sight on the figure’s trunk.

“Keep him covered,” ordered the commander. “I’m going down.”

Root advanced along the tunnel, keeping well out of Holly’s line of fire. If Scalene did make a move, Holly would need a clear shot. But the general (if it was him) squatted immobile, his spine curled along the tunnel wall. His frame was covered by a full-length hooded cape.

The commander turned on his helmet PA, so he could be heard above the howl of core wind.

“You there. Stand facing the wall. Place your hands on your head.”

The figure did not move. Holly had not expected it to. Root stepped closer, always cautious, knees bent, ready to dive to one side. He poked the figure’s shoulder with his Neutrino 3000.

“On your feet, Scalene.”

The poke was sufficient to knock the figure sideways. The goblin keeled over, landing faceup on the tunnel floor. Soot flakes fluttered around him like disturbed bats. The hood flopped to one side, revealing the figure’s face: most important, the eyes.

“It’s him,” said Root. “He’s been *mesmerized*.”

The general’s slitted eyes were bloodshot and vacant. This was a serious development, as it confirmed that somebody else had planned the escape, and Holly and Root had walked into a trap.

“I recommend we leave,” said Holly. “Immediately.”

“No,” said Root, leaning over the goblin. “Now that we’re here, we might as well take Scalene back with us.”

He placed his free hand on the goblin’s collar, preparing to haul him to his feet. Later, Holly would record in her report that it was at that precise moment when things began to go terribly wrong. What had been a routine, albeit strange, assignment, suddenly became an altogether more sinister affair.

“Do not touch me, elf,” said a voice. A hissing goblin voice. Scalene’s voice. But how could that be? The general’s lips had not moved.

Root reared back, then steadied himself. “What’s going on here?”

Holly’s soldier’s sense was buzzing at the base of her neck.

“Whatever it is, we won’t like it. We should go, Commander, right now.”

Root’s features were thoughtful. “That voice came from his chest.”

“Maybe he had surgery,” said Holly. “Let’s get out of here.”

The commander reached down a hand, flipping Scalene’s cape aside. There was a metal box strapped to the general’s chest. The box was a foot square with a small screen in the center. There was a shadowy face on the screen, and it was talking.

“Ah, Julius,” it said in Scalene’s voice. “I knew you’d come. Commander Root’s famous ego would not allow him to stay out of the action. An obvious trap, and you walked straight into it.”

The voice was definitely Scalene’s, but there was something about the phrasing, the cadence. It was too sophisticated for a goblin. Sophisticated and strangely familiar.

“Have you figured it out yet, Captain Short?” said the voice. A voice that was changing. Slipping into a higher register. The tones were no longer male, not even goblin. That’s a female talking, thought Holly. A female that I know.

A face appeared on the screen. A beautiful and malicious face. Eyes bright with hate. Opal Kobi’s face. The rest of the head was swathed in bandages, but the features were only too visible.

Holly began to speak rapidly into her helmet mike. “Foaly, we have a situation here. Opal Koboi is loose. I repeat, Koboi is loose. This whole thing is a trap. Cordon off the area, sixteen-hundred-foot perimeter, and bring in the medical warlocks. Someone is about to get hurt.”

The face on the screen laughed, tiny pixie teeth glinting like pearls.

“Talk all you want, Captain Short. Foaly can’t hear you.

My device has blocked your transmissions as easily as I blocked your seeker-sleeper and the substance scan that I assume you ran. Your little centaur friend can see you, though. I left him his precious lenses.”

Holly immediately zoomed in on Opal’s pixelated face. If Foaly got a shot of the pixie, he would figure out the rest.

Again Koboi laughed. Opal was genuinely enjoying herself. “Oh very good, Captain. You were always a smart one. Relatively speaking, of course. Show Foaly my face and he will initiate an alert. Sorry to disappoint you, Holly, but this entire device is constructed from stealth ore and is practically invisible to the artificial eye. All Foaly will see is a slight shimmer of interference.”

Stealth ore had been developed for space vehicles. It absorbed every form of wave or signal known to fairy or man, and so was virtually invisible to everything but the naked eye. It was also incredibly expensive to manufacture. Even the small amount necessary to cover Koboi’s device would have cost a warehouse full of gold.

Root straightened quickly. “The odds are against us here, Captain. Let’s move out.”

Holly didn’t bother with relief. Opal Koboi wouldn’t make things that easy. There was no way they were just walking out of here. If Foaly could hijack the terminal’s computers, then so could Koboi.

Opal’s laugh stretched to an almost hysterical screech.

“Move out? How very tactical of you, Commander. You really need to expand your vocabulary. Whatever next? Duck and cover?”

Holly peeled back a Velcro patch on her sleeve, revealing a Gnommish keyboard. She quickly accessed her helmet’s LEP criminal database, opening Opal Koboi’s file in her visor.

“Opal Koboi,” said Corporal Frond’s voice. The LEP always used Frond for voice-overs and recruitment videos. She was glamorous and elegant, with flowing blond tresses and inch-long manicured nails that were absolutely no use in the field. “LEP enemy number one. Currently under guard in the J. Argon Clinic. Opal Koboi is a certified genius, scoring over three hundred on the standardized IQ test. She is also a suspected megalomaniac, with an obsessive personality. Studies indicate that Koboi may be a pathological liar, and suffers from mild schizophrenia. For more detailed information, please consult the LEP central library on the second floor of Police Plaza.”

Holly closed the file. An obsessive genius and a pathological liar. Just what they needed. The information didn’t help much; it pretty much told her what she already knew. Opal was loose, she wanted to kill them, and she was smart enough to figure out how to do it.

Opal was still enjoying her triumph. “You don’t know how long I have waited for this moment,” the pixie said, then paused. “Actually, you *do* know. After all, you were the ones who wrecked my plan. And now I have you both.”

Holly was puzzled. Opal may have serious mental issues, but that could not be confused with stupidity. Why would she prattle on? Was she trying to distract them?

The same thing occurred to Root. “Holly! The doors!”

Holly whirled around to see the blast doors sliding across, the sound of their engines masked by core wind. If those doors closed they would be completely cut off from the LEP, and at the mercy of Opal Koboi.

Holly targeted the magnetic rollers along the doors' upper rim, sinking blast after blast from her Neutrino into their mechanisms. The doors jerked in their housings, but did not stop. Two of the rollers blew out, but the massive portals' momentum carried them together. They connected with an ominous bong.

"Alone at last," said Opal, sounding for all the world like an innocent college fairy on her first date.

Root pointed his weapon at the device belted around Scalene's middle, as if he could somehow hurt Koboi.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"You know what I want," replied Opal. "The question is, how am I going to get it? What form of revenge would be the most satisfying? Naturally, you will both end up dead, but that's not enough. I want you to suffer as I did. Discredited and despised. One of you at least; the other will have to be sacrificed. I don't really care which."

Root retreated to the blast doors, motioning for Holly to follow. "Options?" he whispered, his back to Koboi's device.

Holly raised her visor, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow. The helmets were air-conditioned, but sometimes sweating had nothing to do with temperature.

"We have to get out of here," she said. "The chute is the only way."

Root nodded. "Agreed. We fly up far enough to clear Koboi's blocker signal, then alert Major Kelp."

"What about Scalene? He's mesmerized to the gills; he can't look after himself. If we do escape, Opal is not going to leave him around as evidence."

It was basic criminal logic. Your typical take-over-the-world types are not averse to knocking off a few of their own if it means a clean getaway.

Root actually growled. "It really tugs my beard to put us in harm's way over a goblin, but that's the job. We take Scalene with us. I want you to sink a few charges into that box around his waist, and when the buzzing stops, I throw him over my shoulder and we're off up E37."

"Understood," said Holly, lowering the setting on her weapon to minimum. Some of the charge would be transferred to Scalene, but it wouldn't do much more than dry up his eyeballs for a couple of minutes.

"Ignore the pixie. Whatever she says, keep your mind on the job."

"Yes, sir."

Root took several deep breaths. Somehow it calmed Holly to see the commander as nervous as she was. "Okay. Go."

The two elves turned and strode rapidly toward the unconscious goblin.

"Have we come up with a little plan?" said Koboi, mocking them from the small screen. "Something ingenious, I hope. Something I haven't thought of?"

Grim faced, Holly tried to shut out the words, but they wormed their way into her thoughts. Something ingenious? Hardly. It was simply the only option open to them. Something Koboi hadn't thought of? Doubtful. Opal conceivably could have been planning this for almost a year. Were they just about to do exactly what she wanted?

"Sir . . ." began Holly, but Root was already in position beside Scalene.

Holly fired six charges at the small screen. All six impacted on Koboi's pixelated

features. Opal's image disappeared in a storm of static. Sparks squeezed between the metal seams and acrid smoke leaked through the speaker grid.

Root hesitated for a moment, allowing any charge to disperse, then grabbed Scalene firmly by the shoulders.

Nothing happened.

I was wrong, thought Holly, releasing a breath she did not realize she'd been holding. I was wrong, thank the gods. Opal has no plan. But it wasn't true, and Holly didn't really believe it.

The box around Scalene's midriff was secured by a set of octo-bonds, eight telescoping cables often used by the LEP to restrain dangerous criminals. They could be locked and unlocked remotely, and once cinched, could not be removed without the remote or an angle grinder. As soon as Root leaned over, the octo-bonds released Scalene and whiplashed around the commander's torso, releasing Scalene and drawing the metal box tight to Root's own chest.

Koboi's face appeared on the reverse side of the box. The smokescreen had been just that: a smokescreen.

"Commander Root," she said, almost breathless with malice. "It looks like you're the sacrifice."

"D'Arvit!" swore Root, beating the metal box with the butt of his pistol. The cords tightened until Root's breath came in agonized spurts. Holly heard more than one rib crack. The commander fought the urge to sink to his feet. Magical blue sparks played around his torso, automatically healing the broken bones.

Holly rushed forward to help, but before she could reach her superior officer, an urgent beeping began to emanate from the device's speaker. The closer she got, the louder the beep.

"Stay back," grunted Root. "Stay back. It's a trigger."

Holly stopped in her sooty tracks, punching the air in frustration. But the commander was probably right. She had heard of proximity triggers before. Dwarfs used them in the mines. They would set a charge in the tunnels, activate a proximity trigger, and then set it off from a safe distance, using a stone.

Opal's face reappeared on the screen.

"Listen to your Julius, Captain Short," advised the pixie. "This is a moment for caution. Your commander is quite right: the tone you hear is indeed a proximity trigger. If you come too close, he will be vaporized by the explosive gel packed into the metal box."

"Stop lecturing and tell us what you want," snarled Root.

"Now, now, Commander, patience. Your worries will be over soon enough. In fact they are already over, so why don't you just wait quietly while your final seconds tick away."

Holly circled the commander, keeping the beep constant, until her back was to the chute. "There's a way out of this, Commander," she said. "I just need to think. I need a minute to sort things out."

"Let me help you to *sort things out*," said Koboi mockingly, her childlike features ugly with malice. "Your LEP comrades are currently trying to laser their way in here. Of course they will never make it in time. But you can bet that my old school chum, Foaly, is glued to his video screen. So what does he see? He sees his good friend Holly Short apparently holding a gun on her commander. Now why would she want to do that?"

"Foaly will figure it out," said Root. "He beat you before."

Opal remote-tightened the octo-bonds, forcing the commander to his knees. "Maybe he would figure it out at that. If he had time. But unfortunately for you, time is almost up."

On Root's chest, a digital readout flickered to life. There were two numbers on the readout. A six and a zero. Sixty seconds.

"One minute to live, Commander. How does that feel?"

The numbers began ticking down.

The ticking and the beeping and Opal's snide sniggers drilled into Holly's brain. "Shut it down, Koboï. Shut it down, or I swear I'll . . ."

Opal's laughter was unrestrained. It echoed through the access tunnel like the attack screech of a harpy.

"You will what? Exactly. Die beside your commander?"

More cracks. More ribs broken. The blue sparks of magic circled Root's torso like stars caught in a whirlwind.

"Go now," he grunted. "Holly. I am ordering you to leave."

"With respect, Commander. No. This isn't over yet."

"Forty-eight," said Opal in a happy singsong voice. "Forty-seven."

"Holly! Go!"

"I'd listen if I were you," said Koboï. "There are other lives at stake. Root is already dead; why not save someone who can be saved?"

Holly moaned. Another element in an already overloaded equation.

"Who can I save? Who's in danger?"

"Oh, no one important. Just a couple of Mud Men."

Of course, thought Holly: Artemis and Butler. Two others who had put a stop to Koboï's plan.

"What have you done, Opal?" said Holly, shouting above the proximity trigger and core wind.

Koboï's lip drooped, mimicking a guilty child. "I'm afraid I may have put your human friends in danger. At this very moment they are stealing a package from the International Bank in Munich. A little package I prepared for them. If Master Fowl is as clever as he is supposed to be, he won't open the package until he reaches the Kronski Hotel and can check for booby traps. Then a biobomb will be activated, and bye-bye obnoxious humans. You can stay here and explain all this; I'm sure it won't take more than a few hours to sort out with Internal Affairs. Or you can try to rescue your friends."

Holly's head reeled. The commander, Artemis, Butler. All about to die. How could she save them? There was no way to win.

"I will hunt you down, Koboï. For you, there won't be a safe inch on the planet."

"Such venom. What if I gave you a way out? One chance to win."

Root was on his knees now, blood leaking from the corner of his mouth. The blue sparks were gone; he was out of magic.

"It's a trap," he gasped, every syllable making him wince. "Don't be fooled again."

"Thirty," said Koboï. "Twenty-nine."

Holly felt her forehead throb against the helmet pads. "Okay. Okay, Koboï. Tell me quickly. How do I save the commander?"

Opal took a deep theatrical breath. "On the device. There's a sweet spot. One inch diameter. The red dot below the screen. If you hit that spot from outside the trigger area, then you overload the circuit. If you miss, even by a hair, you set off the explosive gel. It's a sporting chance; more than you gave me, Holly Short."

Holly gritted her teeth. "You're lying. Why would you give me a chance?"

“Don’t take the shot,” said Root, strangely calm. “Just get out of range. Go and save Artemis. That’s the last order I’ll ever give you, Captain. Don’t you dare ignore it.”

Holly felt as though her senses were being filtered through three feet of water. Everything was blurred and slowed down.

“I don’t have any choice, Julius.”

Root frowned. “Don’t call me Julius! You always do that just before you disobey me. Save Artemis, Holly. Save him.”

Holly closed one eye and aimed her pistol. The laser sights were no good for this kind of accuracy. She would have to do it manually.

“I’ll save Artemis next,” she said. Holly took a deep breath, held it, and squeezed the trigger.

Holly hit the red spot. She was certain of it. The charge sank into the device, spreading across the metal face like a tiny bushfire.

“I hit it,” she shouted at Opal’s image. “I hit the spot.”

Koboi shrugged. “I don’t know. I thought you were a fraction low. Hard luck. I mean that sincerely.”

“No!” screamed Holly.

The countdown on Root’s chest ticked faster than before, flickering through the numbers. There were mere moments left now.

The commander struggled to his feet, raising the visor on his helmet. His eyes were steady and fearless. He smiled gently at Holly. A smile that laid no blame. For once there wasn’t even a touch of feverish temper in his cheeks.

“Be well,” he said, and then an orange flame blossomed in the center of his chest.

The explosion sucked the air from the tunnel, feeding on the oxygen. Multicolored flames roiled like the plumage of battling birds. Holly was shunted backward by a wall of shock waves, the force impacting every surface facing the commander. Microfilaments blew in her suit as they were overloaded with heat and force. The camera cylinder on her helmet popped right out of its groove, spinning into E37.

Holly herself was borne bodily into the chute, spinning like a twig in a cyclone. Sonix sponges in her earpieces sealed automatically as the sound of the explosion caught up with the blast. The commander had disappeared inside a ball of flame. He was gone, there was no doubt about it. Even magic could not help him now. Some things are beyond fixing.

The contents of the access tunnel, including Root and Scalene, disintegrated into a cloud of shrapnel and dust, particles ricocheting off the tunnel walls. The cloud surged down the path of least resistance, which was of course directly after Holly. She barely had time to activate her wings and climb a few meters, before flying shrapnel drilled a hole in the chute wall below her.

Holly hovered in the vast tunnel, the sound of her own breathing filling the helmet. The commander was dead. It was unbelievable. Just like that, at the whim of a vengeful pixie. Had there been a sweet spot on the device? Or had she actually missed the target? She would probably never know. But to the LEP observers, it would seem as though she had shot her own commander.

Holly glanced downward. Below her, fragments from the explosion were spiraling toward the earth’s core. As they neared the revolving magma sphere, the heat ignited each one, utterly cremating all that was left of Julius Root. For the briefest moment the particles twinkled gold and bronze, like a million stars falling to earth.

Holly hung there for several minutes, trying to absorb what had happened. She couldn’t.

It was too awful. Instead she froze the pain and guilt, preserving it for later. Right now, she had an order to follow. And she would follow it, even if it was the last thing she ever did, because it had been the last order Julius Root ever gave.

Holly increased the power to her wings, rising through the massive charred chute. There were Mud Men to be saved.

CHAPTER 4 ***NARROW ESCAPES***

Munich

Munich during working hours was like any other major city in the world: utterly congested. In spite of the U-bahn, an efficient and comfortable rail system, the general population preferred the privacy and comfort of their own cars, with the result that Artemis and Butler were stuck on the airport road in a rush-hour traffic jam that stretched all the way from the International Bank to the Kronski Hotel.

Master Artemis did not like delays. But today he was too focused on his latest acquisition, *The Fairy Thief*, still sealed in its Perspex tube. Artemis itched to open it, but the previous owners, Sparrow and Crane, could have somehow booby-trapped the container. Just because there were no visible traps didn't mean that there couldn't be an invisible one. An obvious trick would be to vacuum pack the canvas, then inject a corrosive gas that would react with oxygen, and burn the painting.

It took almost two hours to reach the hotel, a journey that should have taken twenty minutes. Artemis changed into a dark cotton suit, then called up Fowl Manor's number on his mobile phone's speed dial. But before he connected, he linked the phone by firewire to his Powerbook, so he could record the conversation. Angeline Fowl answered on the third ring.

"Arty," said his mother, sounding slightly out of breath, as though she had been in the middle of something. Angeline Fowl did not believe in taking life easy, and was probably halfway through a Tae Bo workout.

"How are you, Mother?"

Angeline sighed down the phone line. "I'm fine, Arty, but you sound like you're doing a job interview, as usual. Always so formal. Couldn't you call me Mom or even Angeline? Would that be so terrible?"

"I don't know, Mother. Mom sounds so infantile. I am fourteen now, remember?"

Angeline laughed. "How could I forget? Not many teenage boys ask for a ticket to a genetics' symposium for their birthday."

Artemis had one eye on the Perspex tube. "And how is Father?"

"He is wonderful," gushed Angeline. "I am surprised how well he is. That prosthetic leg of his is marvelous, and so is his outlook. He never complains. I honestly think that he's got a better attitude toward life now than he did before he lost his leg. He's under the care of a remarkable therapist, who says the mental is far more important than the physical. In fact, we leave for the private spa in Westmeath this evening. They use this marvelous seaweed treatment, which should do wonders for your father's muscles."

Artemis Fowl senior had lost a leg before his kidnap by the Russian Mafiya. Luckily, Artemis had been able to rescue him with Butler's help. It had been an eventful year. Since Artemis senior's return, he had been making good on his promise to turn over a new leaf and go

straight. Artemis junior was expected to follow suit, but was having trouble abandoning his criminal ventures. Although, sometimes when he looked at his father and mother together, the idea of being a normal son to loving parents didn't seem like such a far-fetched one.

"Is he doing his physiotherapy exercises twice a day?"

Angeline laughed again, and suddenly Artemis wished he were home.

"Yes, *Granddad*. I am making sure of that. Your father says he'll run the marathon in twelve months."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. Sometimes I think you two would spend your time wandering around the grounds holding hands if I didn't check up on you."

His mother sighed, and static rushed through the speaker. "I'm worried about you, Arty. Someone your age shouldn't be quite so . . . responsible. Don't worry about us; worry about school and friends. Think about what you really want to do. Use that big brain of yours to make yourself and other people happy. Forget the family business. Living is the family business now."

Artemis didn't know how to reply. Half of him wanted to point out that there really would be no family business if it weren't for him secretly safeguarding it. The other half of him wanted to get on a plane home and wander the grounds with his family.

His mother sighed again. Artemis hated that just talking to him could make her worry.

"When will you be home, Arty?"

"The trip ends in three more days."

"I mean, when will you be home for good. I know Saint Bartleby's is a family tradition, but we want you home with us. Principal Guiney will understand. There are plenty of good day schools locally."

"I see," said Artemis. Could he do it? he wondered. Just be part of a normal family. Abandon his criminal enterprises. Was it in him to live an honest life?

"The holidays are in a couple of weeks. We can talk then," he said. Using a delay tactic, he continued, "To be honest, I can't concentrate now. I'm not feeling very well. I thought I might have food poisoning, but it turns out to be just a twenty-four-hour bug. The local doctor says I will be fine tomorrow."

"Poor Arty," crooned Angeline. "Maybe I should put you on a plane home."

"No, Mother. I'm feeling better already. Honestly."

"Whatever you like. I know bugs are uncomfortable, but it's better than a dose of food poisoning. You could have been laid low for weeks. Drink plenty of water, and try to sleep."

"I will, Mother."

"You'll be home soon?"

"Yes. Tell father I called."

"I will, if I can find him. He's in the gym, I think, on the treadmill."

"Good-bye, then."

"Bye, Arty, we'll talk more about this on your return," said Angeline, her voice low and slightly sad, sounding very far away.

Artemis ended the call and immediately replayed it on his computer. Every time he spoke to mother he felt guilty. Angeline Fowl had a way of awakening his conscience. This was a relatively new development. A year ago he may have felt a tiny pinprick of guilt at lying to his mother, but now even the minor trick he was about to play would haunt his thoughts for weeks.

Artemis watched the sound-wave meter on his computer screen. He was changing, no doubt about it.

This kind of self-doubt had been increasing over the past several months—ever since he

had discovered mysterious mirrored contact lenses in his own eyes one morning. Butler and Juliet had been wearing the same lenses. They had tried to find out where the lenses had come from, but all that Butler's contact in that field would say was that Artemis himself had paid for them. Curiouser and curiouser.

The lenses remained a mystery. And so did Artemis's feelings. On the table before him was Hervé's *The Fairy Thief*, an acquisition that established him as the foremost thief of the age. A status he had longed for since the age of six. But now that his ambition was literally in his grasp, all he could think about was his family.

Is now the time to retire? he thought. Age fourteen and three months, the best thief in the world. After all, where can I go from here? He replayed a section of the phone conversation again: *Don't worry about us, worry about school and friends. Think about what you really want to do. Use that big brain of yours to make yourself and other people happy.*

Maybe his mother was right: he should use his talents to make others happy. But there was a darkness in him. A hard surface on his heart that would not be satisfied with the quiet life. Maybe there were ways to make people happy that only he could achieve. Ways on the far side of the law. Over the thin blue line.

Artemis rubbed his eyes. He could not come to a conclusion. Perhaps living at home full time would make the decision for him. Best to continue with the job at hand. Buy some time, and then authenticate the painting. Even though he felt some guilt about stealing the masterpiece, it was not nearly enough to make him give it back. Especially to Messrs. Crane and Sparrow.

The first task was to deflect any inquiries from the school as to his activities. He would need at least two days to authenticate the painting, as some of the tests would need to be contracted out.

Artemis opened an audio manipulation program on his Powerbook and set about cutting and pasting his mother's words from the recorded phone call. When he had selected the words he wanted, and put them in the right order, he smoothed the levels to make the speech sound natural.

When Principal Guiney turned on his mobile phone after the visit to Munich's Olympia Stadium, there would be a new message waiting for him. It would be from Angeline Fowl, and she would not be in a good mood.

Artemis routed the call through Fowl Manor, then sent the edited sound file by infrared to his own mobile phone.

"Principal Guiney." The voice was unmistakably Angeline Fowl's, and the caller ID would confirm it. "I'm worried about Arty. He has a dose of food poisoning. His outlook is marvelous and he never complains, but we want him home with us. You understand. I put Arty on a plane home. I am surprised he got a dose of food poisoning under your care. We will talk more on your return."

That took care of school for a few days. The dark half of Artemis felt an electric thrill at the subterfuge, but his growing conscience felt a tug of guilt at using his mother's voice to weave his web of lies.

He banished the guilt. It was a harmless lie. Butler would escort him home, and his education would not suffer through a few days' absence. As for stealing *The Fairy Thief*, theft from thieves was not real crime. It was almost justifiable. *Yes*, said a voice in his head, unbidden. *If you give the painting back to the world.*

No, replied his granite-hearted half. *This painting is mine until someone can steal it away. That's the whole point.*

Artemis banished his indecision and turned off his mobile phone. He needed to focus completely on the painting, and a vibrating phone at the wrong moment could cause his hand to jitter. His natural inclination was to pop the stopper on the Perspex tube's lid. But that could be more than foolish: it could be fatal. There were any number of little gifts that Crane and Sparrow could have left for him.

Artemis took a chromatograph from the rigid suitcase that contained his lab equipment. The instrument would take a sample of the gas inside the tube and process it. He chose a needle nozzle from a selection of several and screwed it on to the rubber tube protruding from the chromatograph's flat end. He held the needle carefully in his left hand. Artemis was ambidextrous, but his left hand was slightly steadier. With care, he poked the needle through the tube's silicon seal, into the space around the painting. It was essential that the needle be moved as little as possible, so the container's gas could not leak out and mingle with the air. The chromatograph siphoned a small sample of gas, sucking it into a heated injection port. Any organic impurities were driven off by heating, and a carrier gas transported the sample through a separation column and into a Flame Ionization Detector. There, individual components were identified. Seconds later a graph flashed up on the instrument's digital readout. The percentages of oxygen, hydrogen, methane, and carbon dioxide matched a sample taken earlier from downtown Munich. There was a five percent slice of gas which remained unidentified. But that was normal. This was probably caused by complex pollution gases or equipment sensitivity. Mystery gas aside, Artemis knew that it was perfectly safe to open the tube. He did so, carefully slitting the seal with a craft knife.

Artemis put on a set of surgical gloves and teased the painting from the cylinder. It plopped onto the table in a tight roll, but sprung loose almost immediately. It hadn't been in the tube long enough to retain the shape. Artemis spread the canvas wide, weighing the corners with smooth gel sacs. He knew immediately that this was no fake. His eye for art took in the primary colors and layered brushwork. Hervé's figures seemed to be composed of light. So beautifully were they painted that the picture seemed to sparkle. It was exquisite. In the picture a swaddled baby slept in its sun-drenched cot near an open window. A fairy with green skin and gossamer wings had alighted on the windowsill and was preparing to snatch the baby from its cradle. Both of the creature's feet were on the outside of the sill.

"It can't go inside," muttered Artemis absently, and was immediately surprised. How did he know that? He didn't generally voice opinions without some evidence to back them up.

Relax, he told himself. It was simply a guess. Perhaps based on a sliver of information he had picked up on one of his Internet trawls.

Artemis returned his attention to the painting itself. He had done it. *The Fairy Thief* was his, for the moment at any rate. He selected a surgical scalpel from his kit and scraped the tiniest sliver of paint from the picture's border. He deposited the sliver in a sample jar and labeled it. This would be sent to the Technical University of Munich, where they had one of the giant spectrometers necessary for carbon dating. Artemis had a contact there. The radiocarbon test would confirm that the painting, or at least the paint, was as old as it was supposed to be.

He called to Butler in the suite's other room.

"Butler, could you take this sample over to the university now. Remember, give it only to Christiana, and remind her that speed is vital."

There was no answer for a moment, then Butler came charging through the door, his eyes wide. He did not look like a man coming to collect a paint sample.

"Is there a problem?" asked Artemis.

Two minutes earlier, Butler had been holding his hand to the window, lost in a rare moment of self-absorption. He glared at the hand, almost as if the combination of sunlight and staring would make the skin transparent. He knew that there was something different about him. Something hidden below the skin. He had felt strange this past year. Older. Perhaps the decades of physical hardship were taking their toll on him. Though he was barely forty, his bones ached at night and his chest felt as though he were wearing a Kevlar vest all the time. He was certainly nowhere near as fast as he had been at thirty-five, and even his mind seemed less focused, more inclined to wander. . . . *Just as it is doing now*, the bodyguard scolded himself silently.

Butler flexed his fingers, straightened his tie, and got back to work. He was not at all happy with the security of the hotel suite. Hotels were a bodyguard's nightmare. Service elevators, isolated upper floors, and totally inadequate escape routes made the principal's safety almost impossible to guarantee. The Kronski was luxurious, certainly, and the staff efficient, but that was not what Butler looked for in a hotel. He looked for a ground-floor room with no windows and a six-inch steel door. Needless to say, rooms like this were impossible to find, and even if he could find one, Master Artemis would undoubtedly turn up his nose at it. Butler would have to make do with this third-story suite.

Artemis wasn't the only one with a case of instruments. Butler opened a chrome briefcase on the coffee table. It was one of a dozen such cases that he held in safe-deposit boxes in the world's capitals. Each case was full to bursting with surveillance equipment, counter surveillance equipment, and weaponry. Having one in each country meant that he did not have to break customs laws on each overseas trip from Ireland.

He selected a bug sweeper and quickly ran it around the room, searching for listening devices. He concentrated on the electrical appliances: phone, television, fax machine. The electronic waffle from those items could often drown a bug's signal, but not with this particular sweeper. The Eye Spy was the most advanced sweeper on the market and could detect a pinhole mike half a mile away.

After several minutes he was satisfied, and was on the point of returning the device to the case, when it registered a tiny electrical field. Nothing much, barely a single flickering blue bar on the indicator. The first bar solidified, then turned bright blue. The second bar began to flicker. Something electronic was closing in on them. Most men would have discounted the reading. After all, there were several thousand electronic devices within a square mile of the Kronski Hotel. But normal electronic fields did not register on the Eye Spy, and Butler was not most men. He extended the sweeper's aerial, and panned the device around the room. The reading spiked when the aerial was pointed at the window. A claw of anxiety tugged at Butler's intestines. Something airborne was coming closer at high speed.

He dashed to the window, ripped the net curtains from their hooks, and flung open the window. The winter air was pale blue with remarkably few clouds. Jet trails crisscrossed the sky like a giant's game of tic-tac-toe. And there, twenty degrees up—a gentle spiraling curve—was a tear-shaped rocket of blue metal. A red light winked on its nose, and white-hot flames billowed from its rear end. The rocket was heading for the Kronski, no doubt about it.

It's a smart bomb, Butler said to himself without one iota of doubt. *And Master Artemis is the target.*

Butler's brain began flicking through his list of alternatives. It was a short list. There were only two choices, really: get out or die. It was *how* to get out that was the problem. They were three stories up with the exit on the wrong side. He spared a moment to take one last look at the approaching missile. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Even the emission was different

from conventional weapons, with hardly any vapor trail. Whatever this was, it was brand new. Somebody must want Artemis dead very badly.

Butler turned from the window and barged into Artemis's bedroom. The young master was busy conducting his tests on *The Fairy Thief*.

"Is there a problem?" asked Artemis.

Butler did not reply because he didn't have time. Instead he grabbed the teenager by the scruff of the neck and hoisted him onto his own back.

"The painting!" Artemis managed to shout, his voice muffled by the bodyguard's jacket.

Butler grabbed the picture, unceremoniously stuffing the priceless masterpiece into his jacket pocket. If Artemis had been able to see the century-old oil paint crack, he would have sobbed. But Butler was only paid to protect one thing, and it was not *The Fairy Thief*.

"Hang on extremely tightly," advised the massive bodyguard, hefting a king-size mattress from the bed.

Artemis held on tight as he'd been told, trying not to think. Unfortunately his brilliant brain automatically analyzed the available data: Butler had entered the room at speed and without knocking; therefore, there was danger of some kind. His refusal to answer questions meant that the danger was imminent. And the fact that Artemis was on Butler's back, hanging on tightly, indicated that they would not be escaping the aforementioned danger through conventional exit routes. The mattress would indicate that some cushioning would be needed.

"Butler," gasped Artemis. "You do know that we're three stories up?"

Butler might have answered, but his employer did not hear him, because by then the giant bodyguard had propelled them through the open double windows and over the balcony railing.

For a fraction of a second, before the inevitable fall, the air currents spun the mattress around, and Artemis could see back into his own bedroom. In that splinter of a moment, he saw a strange missile corkscrew through the bedroom door and come to a complete halt directly over the empty Perspex tube. There was some kind of tracker in the tube, said the tiny portion of his brain that wasn't panicking. Someone wants me dead.

Then came the inevitable fall. Thirty feet. Straight down.

Butler automatically spread his limbs in a skydiving X, bearing down on the four corners of the mattress to stop it from flipping. The trapped air below the mattress slowed their fall slightly, but not much. The pair went straight down, fast, G-force increasing their speed with every inch.

Sky and ground seemed to stretch and drip like oil paints on a canvas, and nothing seemed solid anymore. This impression came to an abrupt halt when they slammed into the extremely solid tiled roof of a maintenance shed at the hotel's rear. The tiles seemed to almost explode under the impact, though the roof timbers held—barely. Butler felt as though his bones had been liquidized, but he knew that he would be okay after a few moments of unconsciousness. He had been in worse collisions before.

His last impression before his senses deserted him was the feel of Master Artemis's heartbeat through his jacket. Alive, then. They had both survived. But for how long? If their assassin had seen his attempt fail, then maybe he would try again.

Artemis's impact was cushioned by Butler and the mattress. Without them he certainly would have been killed. As it was, the bodyguard's muscle-bound frame was dense enough to break two of his ribs. Artemis bounced a full three feet into the air before coming to rest on the unconscious bodyguard's back, facing the sky.

Each breath was short and painful, and two nubs of bone rose like knuckles from his

chest. Sixth and seventh rib, he guessed.

Overhead, a block of iridescent blue light flashed from his hotel window. It lit the sky for a split second, its belly busy with even brighter blue flares that wriggled like hooked worms. No one would pay much attention; the light could easily have been from an oversized camera flash. But Artemis knew better.

Bio-bomb, he thought. Now, how do I know that?

Butler was unconscious or else he would be moving, so it was up to Artemis to foil their attacker's next murderous attempt. He tried to sit up, but the pain in his chest was ferocious, and intense enough to knock him out for a second. When he came to, his entire body was slick with sweat. Artemis saw that it was too late to escape. His assassin was already here, crouched catlike on the shed wall. The killer was a strange individual, no bigger than a child but with adult proportions. She was female with pretty, sharp features, cropped auburn hair, and huge hazel eyes, but that didn't necessarily mean any mercy would be forthcoming. Butler had once told him that eight of the top-ten paid hitters in the world were women. She wore a strange jumpsuit that shifted colors to suit the background, and those large eyes were red from crying.

Her ears are pointed, thought Artemis. Either I'm in shock, or she's not human.

Then he made the mistake of moving again, and one of his broken ribs actually punched through the skin. A red stain blossomed on his shirt, and Artemis gave up the fight to stay conscious.

It had taken Holly only ninety minutes to reach Germany. On a normal mission it would have taken at least twice that, but Holly had decided to break a few LEP regulations. Why not? she reasoned. It wasn't as if she could get into any more trouble. The LEP already thought she had killed the Commander, and her communications were blocked so she could not explain what really happened. No doubt she was classified as rogue, and there was a Retrieval squad already on her tail. Not to mention the fact that Opal Kobi was probably keeping electronic tabs on her. So there was no time to lose.

Ever since the goblin gangs had been caught smuggling human contraband through disused chutes, sentries had been posted in each surface shuttleport. Paris was guarded by a sleepy gnome who was only five years from retirement. He was awoken from his afternoon nap by an urgent communiqué from Police Plaza. There was a rogue Recon jock on the way up. Detain for questioning. Proceed with caution.

Nobody really expected that the gnome would have any success. Holly Short was in peak physical condition and had once lived through a tussle with a troll. The gnome sentry couldn't even remember the last time he'd been in shape, and had to lie down if he got a hangnail. Nevertheless, the sentry gamely guarded the shuttlebay until Holly blew past him on her way to the surface.

Once in the air, she peeled back a Velcro patch on her forearm, and ran a search on her computer. The computer found the Kronski Hotel and flashed up three route options. Holly chose the shortest one, even though it meant passing over several major human population centers. More LEP regulations smashed to bits. At this point she really didn't care. Her own career was beyond salvaging, but that didn't matter. Holly had never been a career elf anyway. The only reason she hadn't already been booted out of the LEP was the commander. He had seen her potential, and now he was gone.

The earth flashed by below. European smells drifted through her helmet filters. The sea, baked earth, vines, and the tang of pure snow. Generally this was what Holly lived for, but not today. Today she felt none of the usual aboveground euphoria. Today she simply felt alone. The

commander had been the closest thing to family she had left. Now he was gone too. Perhaps because she had missed the sweet spot. Had she effectively killed Julius herself? It was too awful to think about, and too awful to forget.

Holly opened her visor to clear the tears. Artemis Fowl must be saved. As much for the commander as for himself. Holly closed her visor, kicked up her legs, and opened the throttle to maximum. Time to see what these new wings of Foaly's could do.

In a little more than an hour, Holly sped into Munich's airspace. She dropped to a hundred feet and activated her helmet's radar. It would be a shame to make it this far only to be pasted by an incoming aircraft. The Kronski showed up as a red dot in her visor. Foaly could have sent a live satellite feed, or at least the most recent video footage, but she had no way to contact the centaur, and even if she did, the Council would order her back to Police Plaza immediately.

Holly zeroed in on the red dot in her visor. That was where the bio-bomb would be headed, so she had to go there too. She dropped lower, until the Kronski's roof was below her toes, and touched down on the rooftop. She was on her own now. This was as far as the onboard tracker could take her. She would have to locate Artemis's room on her own.

Holly chewed her lip for a moment, then typed a command into the keypad on her wrist. She could have used voice command, but the software was touchy and she did not have time for computer error. In seconds, her onboard computer had hacked into the hotel computer and was displaying a guest list and schematic. Artemis was in room 304. Third story, in the south wing of the hotel.

Holly sprinted across the roof, activating her wings as she ran. She was seconds away from saving Artemis. Having a mythological creature drag him from his hotel room might be a bit of a shock, but not as much of a shock as being vaporized by a bio-bomb.

She stopped dead. A guided missile was arcing in from the horizon toward the hotel. It was fairly manufactured, no doubt about it; but it was new, slicker and faster, with bigger tail rockets than she'd ever seen on a missile. Opal Koboi had obviously been making upgrades.

Holly spun on her heels, racing for the other side of the hotel. In her heart she knew she was too late, and the realization hit her that Opal had set her up again. There never was any hope of rescuing Artemis, just as there never had been any chance of rescuing the commander.

Before her wings even had a chance to kick in, there was a bright blue flash from beyond the lip of the roof, and a slight shudder underfoot as the bio-bomb detonated. It was the perfect weapon. There would be no structural damage to the hotel room, and the bomb casing would consume itself and leave no evidence that it had ever been there.

Holly dropped to her knees in frustration, peeling off her helmet to gulp breaths of fresh air. The Munich air was laced with toxins, but it still tasted better than the belowground filtered variety. But Holly did not notice the sweetness. Julius was gone. Artemis was dead. Butler was dead. How could she go on? What was the point? Tears dropped from her lashes, running into tiny cracks in the concrete.

Get up! said her core of steel. The part of her that made Holly Short such an excellent officer. *You are an LEP officer. There is more at stake here than your personal grieving. Time enough to cry later.*

In a minute. I'll get up in a minute. I just need sixty seconds.

Holly felt as though the grief had scooped out her insides.

She felt hollow, numb. Incapacitated.

"How touching," said a voice, robotic and familiar.

Holly did not even look up. “Koboi. Have you come to gloat? Does murder make you happy?”

“Hmm?” said the voice, seriously considering the question. “You know, it does. It actually does make me happy.”

Holly sniffled, shaking the last tears from her eyes. She decided that she would not cry again until Koboi was behind bars.

“What do you want?” she asked, rising from the concrete roof. Hovering at head height was a small bio-bomb. This model was spherical, about the size of a melon, and equipped with a plasma screen. Opal’s happy features were plastered across the monitor.

“Oh, I just followed you from the chute because I wanted to see what total despair looks like. It’s not very fetching, is it?”

For a few moments the screen displayed Holly’s own distraught face before flashing back to Opal.

“Just detonate, and be damned,” growled Holly.

The bio-bomb rose a foot, slowly circling Holly’s head.

“Not just yet. I think there’s a spark of hope in you yet. So I would like to extinguish that. In a moment I will detonate the bio-bomb. Nice, isn’t it? How do you like the design? Eight separate boosters, you know. It’s what happens after the detonation that’s important.”

Holly’s law-enforcer curiosity was piqued in spite of the circumstances. “What happens then, Koboi? Don’t tell me, world domination.”

Koboi chuckled, the volume distorting her laugh through the bomb’s microspeakers. “World domination? You make it sound so unattainable. The first step is simplicity itself. All I have to do is put humans in contact with the People.”

Holly felt her own troubles instantly slip away. “Put humans in contact with the People? Why would you do that?”

Opal’s features lost their merry cast. “Because the LEP imprisoned me. They studied me like an animal in a cage, and now we shall see how they like it. There will be a war, and I will supply the humans with the weapons to win. And after they have won, my chosen nation will be the most powerful on earth. And I, inevitably, will become the most powerful person in that nation.”

Holly almost screamed. “All this for a childish pixie’s revenge.”

Seeing Holly’s discomfort cheered Opal immediately. “Oh no, I’m not a pixie anymore.” Koboi slowly unwound the bandages circling her head to reveal two surgically rounded humanoid ears. “I’m one of the Mud People now. I intend to be on the winning side. And my new daddy has an engineering company. And that company is sending down a probe.”

“What probe?” shouted Holly. “What company?”

Opal wagged a finger. “Oh no, enough explaining. I want you to die desolate and ignorant.” For one moment her face lost its false merriment, and Holly could see the hatred in her huge eyes. “You cost me a year of my life, Short. A year of a brilliant life. My time is too special to be wasted, especially answering to pathetic organizations like the LEP. Soon I will never have to answer to anyone, ever again.”

Opal raised one hand into view. It was clutching a small remote. She pressed the red button. And as everyone knows, the red button can only mean one thing: Holly had milliseconds to come up with a plan. The monitor fizzled out, and a green light on the missile’s console winked red. The signal had been received. Detonation was imminent.

Holly jumped up, hooking her helmet over the spherical bomb. She put her weight on the

helmet, bearing it down. It was like trying to submerge a football. LEP helmets were composed of a rigid polymer that could deflect solinium flares. Of course, the rest of Holly's suit was not rigid and could not protect her from the biobomb, but maybe the helmet would be enough.

The bomb exploded, spinning the helmet into the air. Pure blue light gushed from the underside of the helmet, dissipating across the concrete. Ants and spiders hopped once, then their tiny hearts froze. Holly could feel her own heart speed up, battling against the deadly solinium. She held on for as long as she could, then the concussion bucked her off. The helmet spun away, and the fatal light was free.

Holly flipped her wing-control to rise, reaching for the skies. The blue light was after her like a wall of death. It was a race now. Had she gained enough time and distance to outrun the bio-bomb?

Holly felt her lips drag back across her teeth. G-force rippled the skin on her cheeks. She was counting on the fact that the bio-bomb's active agent was light. This meant that it could be focused to a certain diameter. Koboi would not want to draw attention to her device by wiping out a city block. Holly alone was her target.

Holly felt the light swipe her toes. A dreadful feeling of nothingness crept up her leg before the magic banished it. She streamlined her body, arcing her head back, folding her arms across her chest, willing the mechanical wings to accelerate her to safety.

Suddenly the light dissipated. Flashed out, leaving only a dozen squirrely flares in its wake. Holly had outrun the deadly light, with only minor injuries. Her legs felt weakened, but the sensation would recede shortly. Time enough to worry about that later. Now she had to return to the Lower Elements and somehow warn her comrades what Opal was planning.

Holly glanced down at the roof. Nothing remained now to suggest she'd ever been there, except the remains of her helmet, which spun like a battered top. Generally, inanimate objects were not affected by bio-bombs, but the helmet's reflective layer had bounced the light around internally so much that it had overheated. And once the helmet had shorted out, so had all Holly's bio-readings. As far as the LEP or Opal Koboi were concerned, Captain Short's helmet was no longer broadcasting her heartbeat or respiratory rate. She was officially dead. And being dead had possibilities.

Something caught Holly's eye. Far below, in the center of a cluster of maintenance buildings, several humans were converging on one hut. With her bird's-eye view, Holly could see that the hut's roof had been blown out. There were two figures lying in the roof timbers. One was huge, a veritable giant. The other, closer to her own size. A boy. Artemis and Butler. Could they have survived?

Holly threw her legs up behind her, diving steeply toward the crash site. She did not shield, conserving her magic. It looked as though every spark of healing power she possessed would be needed, so she would have to trust speed and her revolutionary suit to keep her hidden.

The other humans were several feet away, picking their way through the debris. They looked curious rather than angry. Still, it was vital that Holly get Artemis away from here, if he were alive. Opal could have spies anywhere and a backup plan just waiting to spring into deadly operation. It was doubtful they could cheat death again.

She landed on the shed's gable end and peered inside. It was Artemis, all right, and Butler. Both breathing. Artemis was even conscious, though clearly in pain. Suddenly a red rose of blood spread across his white shirt, his eyes rolled back, and he began to buck. The Mud Boy was going into shock, and it looked like a rib had punctured his skin. There could be another one in his lung. He needed healing. Now.

Holly dropped to Artemis's chest, placing a hand on the nubs of bone protruding under his heart.

"Heal," she said, and the last sparks of magic in her elfin frame sped down her arms, intuitively targeting Artemis's injuries. The ribs shuddered, twisted elastically, then rejoined in a hiss of molten bone. Steam vented from Artemis's shuddering body as the magic flushed impurities from his system.

Even before Artemis had finished shaking, Holly had wrapped herself around the boy as much as possible. She had to get him away from here. Ideally, she could have taken Butler, too, but he was too bulky to be shielded by her slim frame. The bodyguard would have to look out for himself, but Artemis had to be protected. Firstly because he was undoubtedly the prime target, and secondly because she needed his devious brain to help her to defeat Opal Kobi. If Opal intended to join the world of men, then Artemis was the ideal foil for her genius.

Holly locked her fingers behind Artemis's back and hoisted his limp body into an upright position. His head lolled on her shoulder and she could feel his breath on her cheek. Regular. Good.

Holly bent her legs until her knees cracked. She would need all the leverage she could get to mask their escape. Outside the voices grew closer, and she felt the walls shake as someone inserted a key in the door.

"Good-bye, Butler, old friend," she whispered. "I'll be back for you."

The bodyguard groaned once, as though he had heard. Holly hated to leave him, though there was no choice. It was either Artemis alone or no one, and Butler himself would thank her for what she was doing.

Holly gritted her teeth, tensed every muscle in her body, and opened the throttle wide on her wings. She took off out of that shed like a dart from a blowpipe, kicking up a fresh cloud of dust in her wake. Even if someone had been staring right at her, all they would have seen was dust and a sky-colored blur, with possibly one loafered shoe poking out. But that must have been their eyes playing tricks, because shoes couldn't fly. Could they?

CHAPTER 5

MEET THE NEIGHBORS

E37, The Lower Elements

Foaly could not believe what was happening. His eyes were sending information to his brain, but his brain refused to accept it. Because if he were to accept this information, he would have to believe that his friend Holly Short had just shot her own commander and was now attempting to escape to the surface. This was completely impossible, though not everybody was so reluctant to accept this.

The centaur's mobile tech shuttle had been commandeered by Internal Affairs. This operation now fell under their jurisdiction because an LEP officer was suspected of a crime. All LEP personnel had been ejected from the shuttle, but Foaly was allowed to stay simply because he was the only one able to operate the surveillance equipment.

Commander Ark Sool was an LEP gnome who went after suspect police fairies. Sool was unusually tall and thin for a gnome, like a giraffe in a baboon's skin. His dark hair was slicked straight back in a no-nonsense style, and his fingers and ears boasted none of the golden adornments generally so beloved of the gnome families. Ark Sool was the highest-ranking

gnome officer in Internal Affairs, and he believed that the LEP was basically a bunch of loose cannons who were presided over by a maverick. And now the maverick was dead, killed, apparently, by the biggest loose cannon in the bunch. Holly Short may have narrowly avoided criminal charges on two previous occasions. She would not escape this time.

“Play the video again, centaur,” he instructed, tapping the worktop with his cane. Most annoying.

“We’ve looked at this a dozen times,” protested Foaly. “I don’t see the point.”

Sool silenced him with a glare from his red-rimmed eyes. “You don’t see the point? The centaur doesn’t see the point? I don’t see where that’s an important factor in the current equation. You, Mister Foaly, are here to press buttons, not to offer opinions. Commander Root placed far too much value on your opinions, and look where that got him, eh?”

Foaly swallowed the dozen or so acidic responses that were queuing on his tongue. If he was excluded from this operation now, he could do nothing to help Holly.

“Play the video. Yessir.”

Foaly cued the video from E37. It was damning stuff. Julius and Holly hovered around General Scalene for several moments. They appeared to be quite agitated. Then for some reason, and incredible as it sounded, Holly shot the commander with some kind of incendiary bullet. At this point they lost all video feeds from both helmets.

“Back up the tape twenty seconds,” ordered Sool, leaning in close to the monitor. He poked his cane into the plasma screen. “What’s that?”

“Careful with the cane,” said Foaly. “These screens are expensive. I get them from Atlantis.”

“Answer the question, centaur. What is that?” Sool prodded the screen twice, just to show how little he cared about Foaly’s gizmos.

The Internal Affairs Commander was pointing to a slight shimmer on Root’s chest.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Foaly. “It could be heat distortion, or maybe equipment failure. Or perhaps just a glitch. I’ll have to run some tests.”

Sool nodded. “Run your tests, though I don’t expect you’ll find anything. Short is a burnout, simple as that. She always was. I nearly had her before, but this time it’s cut-and-dried.”

Foaly knew he should bite his tongue, but he had to defend his friend. “Isn’t this all a bit convenient. First we lose sound, so we don’t know what was said. Then there’s this fuzzy patch that could be anything; and now we’re expected to believe that a decorated officer just up and shot her commander, an elf who was like a father to her.”

“Yes, I see your point, Foaly,” said Sool silkily. “Very good. Nice to know you’re thinking on some level. But let’s stick to our respective jobs, eh? You build the machinery, and I operate it. For example, these new Neutrinos that our field personnel are armed with?”

“Yes, what about them?” said Foaly suspiciously.

“They are personalized to each officer, am I right? Nobody else can fire them. And each shot is registered?”

“That is correct,” admitted Foaly, all too aware where this was leading.

Sool waved his cane like a symphony conductor. “Well then, surely all we have to do is check Captain Short’s weapon’s log to see if she fired a shot at the precise time indicated on the video. If she did, then the film is authentic, and Holly Short did indeed murder her commander, regardless of what we can or cannot hear.”

Foaly ground his horsey teeth. Of course it made perfect sense. He had thought of it half an hour ago, and already knew what the cross-referencing would reveal. He pulled up Holly’s

weapon's log and read the relevant passage.

"Weapon registered at zero nine forty, HMT. Six pulses at zero nine fifty-six, and then one level two pulse fired at zero nine fifty-eight."

Sool slapped the cane into his palm in triumph. "One level two pulse fired at zero nine fifty-eight. Exactly right. Whatever else happened in that chute, Short fired on her commander."

Foaly leaped out of his specially tailored office chair. "But a level two pulse couldn't cause such a big explosion. It practically caved in the entire access tunnel."

"Which is why Short isn't in custody right now," said Sool. "It will take weeks to clean out that tunnel. I've had to send a Retrieval team through E1, in Tara. They will have to travel over ground to Paris and pick up her trail from there."

"But what about the explosion itself?"

Sool grimaced, as though Foaly's questions were a bitter nugget in an otherwise delicious meal. "Oh, I'm sure there's an explanation, centaur. Combustible gas, or a malfunction, or just bad luck. We'll figure that out. For now my priority, *and yours*, is to bring Captain Short back here for trial. I want you to liaise with the Retrieval team. Feed them constant updates on Short's position."

Foaly nodded without enthusiasm. Holly was still wearing her helmet. And the LEP helmet could verify her identity and relay a constant stream of diagnostic information back to Foaly's computers. They had no sound or video but there was plenty of information to track Holly wherever she might go in the world, or under it. At the moment, Holly was in Germany. Her heart rate was elevated but otherwise she was okay.

Why did you run, Holly? Foaly asked his absent friend silently. *If you're innocent, why did you run?*

"Tell me where Captain Short is now," demanded Sool.

The centaur maximized the live feed from Holly's helmet on the plasma screen.

"She's still in Germany, Munich, to be precise. She's stopped moving now. Maybe she will decide to come home."

Sool frowned. "I seriously doubt it, centaur. She's a bad egg, through and through."

Foaly fumed. Manners dictated that only a friend refer to another fairy by species, and Sool was no friend of his. Or anyone's.

"We can't say that for sure," said Foaly, through his clenched teeth.

Sool leaned even closer to the plasma screen, a slow smile stretching his tight skin.

"Actually, centaur, you're wrong there. I think we can safely say for sure that Captain Short won't be coming back. Recall the Retrieval team immediately."

Foaly checked Holly's screen. The life signs from her helmet were all flatlining. One second she was stressed but alive, and the next she was gone. No heartbeat, no brain activity, no temperature reading. She couldn't have simply taken off the helmet, as there was an infrared connection between each LEP officer and their helmet. No, Holly was dead, and it hadn't been by natural causes.

Foaly felt the tears brimming on his eyelids. Not Holly too.

"Recall the Retrieval team? Are you insane, Sool? We have to find Holly. Find out what happened."

Sool was unaffected by Foaly's outburst. If anything, he appeared to enjoy it.

"Short was a traitor and she was obviously in collusion with the goblins. Somehow her nefarious plan backfired and she was killed. I want you to remote-activate the incinerator in her helmet immediately, and we'll close the book on a rogue officer."

Foaly was aghast. "Activate the remote incinerator! I can't do that."

Sool rolled his eyes. "Again with the opinions. You don't have authority here; you just obey it."

"But I'll have a satellite picture in thirty minutes," protested the centaur. "We can wait that long, surely."

Sool elbowed past Foaly to the keyboard. "Negative. You know the regulations. No bodies are left exposed for the humans to find. It's a tough rule, I know, but necessary."

"The helmet could have malfunctioned," said Foaly, grasping at straws.

"Is it likely that all the life-sign readings could have flatlined at the same moment through equipment failure?"

"No," admitted Foaly.

"And just how unlikely is it?"

"About one chance in ten million," said the technical adviser miserably.

Sool picked his way around the keyboard. "If you don't have the stomach for it, centaur. I'll do it myself." He entered his password and detonated the incinerator in Holly's helmet. On a rooftop in Munich, Holly's helmet dissolved in a pool of acid. And in theory, so did Holly's body.

"There," said Sool, satisfied. "She's gone, and now we can all sleep a little easier."

Not me, thought Foaly, staring forlornly at the screen. It will be a very long time before I sleep easy again.

Temple Bar, Dublin, Ireland

Artemis Fowl woke from a sleep haunted by nightmares. In his dreams, strange, red-eyed creatures had ripped open his chest with scimitar tusks and dined on his heart. He sat up in an undersized cot, both hands flying to his chest. His shirt was caked with dried blood, but there was no wound. Artemis took several deep shuddering breaths, pumping oxygen through his brain. *Assess the situation*, Butler always told him. *If you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, become familiar with it before opening your mouth. Ten seconds of observation could save your life.*

Artemis looked around, eyelids fluttering like camera shutters, absorbing every detail. He was in a small box room, about ten square feet. One wall was completely transparent and appeared to look out over the Dublin quays. From the position of the Millennium Bridge, the room was somewhere in the Temple Bar area. The chamber itself was constructed from a strange material. Some kind of silver-gray fabric. Rigid, but malleable, with several plasma screens on the opaque walls. It was all extremely hi-tech, but seemed years old, and almost abandoned.

In the corner, a girl sat hunched on folding chair. She cradled her head in both hands, her shoulders hitching gently with sobs.

Artemis cleared his throat. "Why are you crying, girl?"

The girl jerked upright, and it became immediately obvious that this was no normal girl. In fact, she appeared to belong to a totally different species.

"Pointed ears," noted Artemis, with surprising composure. "Prosthetic or real?"

Holly almost smiled through her tears. "Typical Artemis Fowl. Always looking for options. My ears are very real, as you well know . . . knew."

Artemis was silent for several moments, processing the wealth of information in those few sentences.

"Real pointed ears? Then you are of another species, not human. Possibly a fairy?"

Holly nodded. "I am a fairy. Actually, an elf. I'm what you would call a leprechaun too,

but that's just a job."

"And fairies speak English, do they?"

"We speak all languages. The gift of tongues, it is part of our magic."

Artemis knew that these revelations should send his world spinning on its axis, but he found himself accepting every word. It was as though he had always suspected the existence of fairies, and this was simply confirmation. Although, strangely, he could not remember ever having even thought about fairies before this day.

"And you claim to know me? Personally or from some kind of surveillance? You certainly seem to have the technology."

"We've known you for a few years now, Artemis. You made first contact, and we've been keeping an eye on you ever since."

Artemis was slightly startled. "I made first contact?"

"Yes. December, two years ago. You kidnapped me."

"Is this your revenge? That explosive device? My ribs?" A horrible thought struck the Irish boy. "And what about Butler? Is he dead?"

Holly did her best to answer all of these questions. "It is revenge, but not mine. And Butler is alive. I just had to get you out of there before another attempt was made on your life."

"So we're friends now?"

Holly shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see."

All of this was slightly confusing. Even for a genius.

Artemis crossed his legs in the lotus position and rested his temples against pointed fingers.

"You had better tell me everything," he said, closing his eyes. "From the beginning. And leave nothing out."

So Holly did. She told Artemis how he had kidnapped her, then released her at the last moment. She told him how they had journeyed to the Arctic to rescue his father, and how they had foiled a goblin rebellion bankrolled by Opal Koboï. She recounted in great detail their mission to Chicago to steal back the C Cube, a super computer constructed by Artemis from pirated fairy technology. Finally, in a small quiet voice, she told of Commander Root's death and of Opal Koboï's sinister plot to bring the fairy and human worlds together.

Artemis sat perfectly still, absorbing hundreds of incredible facts. His brow was slightly creased as if the information were difficult to digest. Finally, when his brain had organized the data, he opened his eyes.

"Very well," he said. "I don't remember any of this, but I believe you. I accept that we humans have fairy neighbors below the planet's surface."

"Just like that?"

Artemis's lip curled. "Hardly. I have taken your story and cross-referenced it with the facts as I know them. The only other scenario that could explain everything that has happened, up to and including your own bizarre appearance, is a convoluted conspiracy theory involving the Russian Mafiya and a crack team of plastic surgeons. Hardly likely. But your fairy story fits, right down to something that you could not know about, Captain Short."

"Which is?"

"After my alleged mind wipe, I discovered mirrored contact lenses in my own eyes and Butler's. Investigation revealed that I myself had ordered the lenses, though I had no memory of the fact. I suspect that I ordered them to cheat your *mesmer*."

Holly nodded. It made sense. Fairies had the power to mesmerize humans, but eye

contact was part of the trick, coupled with a *mesmeric* voice. Mirrored contact lenses would leave the subject completely in control, while pretending to be under the *mesmer*.

“The only reason for this would be if I had planted a trigger somewhere. Something that would cause my fairy memories to come rushing back. But what?”

“I have no idea,” said Holly. “I was hoping that just seeing me would trigger recall.”

Artemis smiled in a very annoying way. As one would at a small child who had just suggested that the moon was made of cheese.

“No, Captain. I would guess that your Mister Foaly’s mind-wiping technology is an advanced version of the memory-suppressant drugs being experimented with by various governments. The brain, you see, is a complex instrument; if it can be convinced that something did not happen, it will invent all kinds of scenarios to maintain that illusion. Nothing can change its mind, so to speak. Even if the conscious accepts something, the mind wipe will have convinced the subconscious otherwise. So, no matter how convincing you are, you cannot convert my altered subconscious. My subconscious probably believes that you are a hallucination or a miniature spy. No, the only way that my memories could be returned to me would be if my subconscious could not present a reasonable argument; say, if the one person that I trust completely presented me with irrefutable evidence.”

Holly felt herself growing annoyed. Artemis could get under her skin like nobody else. A child who treated everyone like children.

“And who is this one person that you trust?”

Artemis smiled genuinely for the first time since Munich. “Why, myself, of course.”

Munich

Butler woke to find blood dripping from the tip of his nose. It was dripping onto the white hat of the hotel chef. The chef stood with a group of hotel kitchen staff in the middle of a destroyed storage shed. The man gripped a cleaver in his hairy fist, just in case this giant on the tattered mattress wedged into the rafters was a madman.

“Excuse me,” said the chef politely, which is unusual for a chef, “are you alive?”

Butler considered the question. Apparently, unlikely as it seemed, he was alive. The mattress had saved him from the strange missile. Artemis had survived, too. He remembered feeling his charge’s heartbeat just before he passed out. It wasn’t there now.

“I am alive,” he grunted, a paste of tile dust and blood spilling from his lips. “Where is the boy who was with me?”

The crowd assembled in the ruined shed looked at one another.

“There was no boy,” said the chef finally. “You fell through the roof all on your own.”

Doubtless, this group would like an explanation or they would inform the police.

“Of course there was no boy. Forgive me; the mind tends to wander after a three-story fall.”

The group nodded as one. Who could blame the giant for being a touch rattled?

“I was leaning against the railing, sunning myself, when the railing gave way. Lucky for me, I managed to grab the mattress on the way down.”

This explanation was met with the mass skepticism it thoroughly deserved. The chef voiced the group’s doubts.

“You managed to grab a mattress?”

Butler had to think quickly, which is not easy when all the blood in your body is concentrated in your forehead.

“Yes. It was on the balcony. I had been resting in the sun.”

This entire sun business was extremely unlikely. Especially considering that it was the middle of winter. Butler realized that there was only one way to dispel the crowd. It was drastic, but it should work.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small spiral pad.

“Of course, I intend to sue the hotel for damages. Trauma alone should be worth a few million euros. Not to mention injuries. I presume I can count on you good people as witnesses.”

The chef paled, as did the others. Giving evidence against one’s employers was the first step to unemployment.

“I . . . I don’t know, sir,” he stammered. “I didn’t actually see anything.” He paused to sniff the air. “I think I smell my Pavlova burning. Dessert will be ruined.”

The chef hopped over the chunks of shattered tile, disappearing back into the hotel. The remaining staff followed his lead, and within seconds, Butler was on his own again. He smiled, though the action sent a flare of pain down his neck. The threat of a lawsuit generally scattered witnesses as effectively as any gunfire.

The giant Eurasian disentangled himself from the remains of the rafters. He really had been amazingly lucky not to be impaled on the beams. The mattress had absorbed most of the impact, and the timbers were rotten and had splintered harmlessly.

Butler dropped to the floor, brushing dust from his suit. His priority now was to find Artemis. It seemed likely that whoever had made the attempt on his life had taken the boy. Although, why would someone try to kill him and then take him prisoner? Unless their unknown enemy had taken advantage of the situation and decided to seek a ransom.

Butler returned to the hotel room, where everything was as they had left it. There was absolutely no sign that anything had exploded in here. The only unusual things revealed by Butler’s investigations were small clusters of dead insects and spiders. Curious. It was as though the blue flash of light only affected living things, leaving buildings unaffected.

A blue rinse, said his subconscious, but his conscious self took no notice.

Butler quickly packed Artemis’s box of tricks, and of course his own. The weapons and surveillance equipment would be held in a safe-deposit box at the airport. He left the Kronski Hotel without checking out. An early checkout would arouse suspicion, and with any luck, this entire matter could be resolved before the students on the school trip returned home.

The bodyguard collected the Hummer in the hotel car park and set off for the airport. If Artemis had been kidnapped, then the kidnappers would contact Fowl Manor with their ransom demand. If Artemis had simply removed himself from danger, he had always been told to head for home. Either way, the trail led to Fowl Manor, so that was where Butler intended to go.

Temple Bar, Dublin, Ireland

Artemis had recovered sufficiently for his natural curiosity to surface. He walked around the cramped room, touching the spongy surface of the walls.

“What is this place? Some form of surveillance hide?”

“Exactly,” said Holly. “I was on stakeout here a few months ago. A group of rogue dwarfs were meeting their jewelry fences here. From the outside, this is just another patch of sky on top of a building. It’s a cham pod.”

“Cam, camouflage?”

“No, cham, chameleon. This suit is cam, camouflage.”

“You do know, I suppose, that chameleons don’t actually change color to suit their surroundings. They change according to mood and temperature.”

Holly looked out over Temple Bar. Below them thousands of tourists, musicians, and

residents were winding their way through the small artisans' streets.

"You'd have to tell Foaly about that. He names all this stuff."

"Ah, yes," said Artemis. "Foaly. He is a centaur, is he not?"

"That's right." Holly turned to face Artemis. "You're taking this very calmly. Most humans completely freak out when they find out about us. Some go into shock."

Artemis smiled. "I am not most humans."

Holly turned back to the view. She was not going to argue with that statement.

"So tell me, Captain Short. If all I am to the Fairy People is a threat, why did you heal me?"

Holly rested her forehead against the cham pod's translucent face.

"It's our nature," she replied. "And of course, I need you to help me to find Opal Koboi. We've done it before, we can do it again."

Artemis stood beside her at the window. "So, first you mind-wipe me, and now you need me?"

"Yes, Artemis. Gloat all you like. The mighty LEP need your help."

"Of course, there is the matter of my fee," said Artemis, buttoning his jacket across the bloodstain on his shirt.

Holly rounded on him. "Your fee? Are you serious? After all the Fairy People have done for you? Can't you just do something good for once in your life?"

"Obviously you elves are an emotional race. Humans are slightly more business-minded. Here are the facts: you are a fugitive from justice, on the run from a murdering pixie genius. You have no funds and few resources. I am the only one who can help you track down this Opal Koboi. I think that's worth a few bars of anybody's gold."

Holly glowered at him. "Like you said, Mud Boy. I don't have any resources."

Artemis spread his hands magnanimously. "I'm prepared to accept your word. If you can guarantee me one metric ton of gold from your hostage fund, I will devise a plan to defeat this Opal Koboi."

Holly was in a hole and she knew it. There was no doubt that Artemis could give her the edge over Opal, but it galled her to pay someone who used to be a friend. "And what if Koboi defeats us?"

"If Koboi defeats and presumably murders us both, then you can consider the debt null and void."

"Great," growled Holly. "It would almost be worth it."

She left the window and began raiding the pod's medical chest. "You know something, Artemis. You're exactly how you were when we first met: a greedy Mud Boy who doesn't care about anyone beside himself. Is that really how you want to be for the rest of your life?"

Artemis's features remained static, but below the surface his emotions were in turmoil. Of course he was right to ask for a fee. It would be stupid not to. But even asking had made him feel guilty. It was this idiotic newfound conscience. His mother seemed to be able to activate it at will, and this fairy creature could do it too. He would have to keep a tighter check on his emotions.

Holly finished raiding the cabinet. "Well, Mister Consultant, what's our first move?"

Artemis did not hesitate. "There are only two of us, and we are not very tall. We need reinforcements. As we speak, Butler will be making for Fowl Manor. He may be there already."

Artemis turned on his cell phone and speed dialed Butler. A recorded message told him that the customer he was trying to reach was not available. He declined the offer to try again,

instead dialing Fowl Manor. An answering machine cut in after the third ring. Obviously his parents had already left for the spa in Westmeath.

“Butler,” said Artemis to the recorder. “You are well, I hope. I myself am fine. Listen very carefully to what I have to tell you, and believe me, every word is true . . .” Artemis proceeded to summarize the day’s events. “We will arrive at the manor shortly. I suggest we stock up on essentials and proceed to a safe house . . .”

Holly tapped him on the shoulder. “We should get out of here. Koboi is no fool. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had some backup plan in case we survived.”

Artemis covered the mouthpiece with his palm. “I agree. That is what I would do. This Koboi person is probably on her way right now.”

As if on cue, one of the pod walls fizzled and dissolved. Opal Koboi stood in the hole, flanked by Merv and Scant Brill. The pixie twins were armed with transparent plastic handguns. Merv’s gun barrel glowed gently in the aftermath of his wall-melting shot.

“Murderer!” shouted Holly, reaching for her gun. Merv casually put a blast close enough to her head to singe her eyebrows. Holly froze, raising her hands in submission.

“Opal Koboi, I presume?” said Artemis; although, if Holly had not told him the whole story, he never would have guessed that the female before him was anything but a human child. Her black hair was braided down her back, and she wore a checked pinafore of the type worn by a million schoolgirls around the world. Her ears were, of course, rounded.

“Artemis Fowl, how nice to see you again. I do believe that in different circumstances we could have been allies.”

“Circumstances change,” said Artemis. “Perhaps we can still be allies.”

Holly chose to give Artemis the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was acting like a traitor to save their skins. Maybe.

Opal fluttered her long, curved eyelashes. “Tempting, but no. I feel the world is only large enough for one child genius. And now that I’m pretending to be a child, that genius would be me. Meet Belinda Zito, a girl with big plans.”

Holly reached a hand toward her weapon, but stopped when Merv leveled his transparent handgun at her.

“I know you,” she said to the Brill brothers. “The Pixie twins. You were on TV.”

Scant couldn’t hold back a grin. “Yes, on *Canto*. It was the season’s highest-rated show. We’re thinking of writing a book, aren’t we, Merv? All about how we . . .”

“Finish each other’s sentences,” completed Merv, though he knew it would cost him.

“Shut up, you utter imbecile,” snapped Opal, shooting Merv a poisonous glare. “Keep your weapon up and your mouth closed. This is not about you; it is about me. Remember that and I might not have to liquidize the pair of you.”

“Yes, of course, Miss Koboi. It’s all about you.”

Opal almost purred. “That’s right. It’s always about me. I am the only important one here.”

Artemis casually slipped one hand into his pocket. The one holding the cell phone that was still connected to Fowl Manor.

“If I may, Miss Koboi. This delusion of self-importance is common among those recently awakened from comas. It is known as the Narcissus Syndrome. I wrote a paper on this precise subject for the Psychologists Yearbook, under the pseudonym Sir E. Brum. You have spent so much time in your own company, so to speak, that everyone else has become unreal. . . .”

Opal nodded at Merv. “For heaven’s sake, shut him up.”

Merv was glad to oblige, sinking a blue power slug into Artemis's chest. The Irish boy dropped in midlecture.

"What have you done?" shouted Holly, dropping to Artemis's side. She was relieved to find a steady heartbeat under the bloodied shirt.

"Oh no," said Opal. "Not dead, merely painfully stunned. He is having quite a day, young Artemis."

Holly's pretty features were distorted by grief and outrage as she glared at the small pixie. "What do you want from us? What else can you do?"

Opal's face was the picture of innocence. "Don't blame me. You have brought this on yourself. All I wanted to do was bring down fairy society as we know it, but oh no, you wouldn't have it. Then I planned a couple of relatively simple assassinations, but you insisted on surviving. Kudos to you for evading the bio-bomb, by the way. I was watching the whole thing from sixty-five feet up in my stealth shuttle. Containing the solinium with an LEP helmet. Good thinking. But now, because you have caused me so much trouble and exasperation, I think I will indulge myself a little."

Holly swallowed the fear that was crawling up her throat. "Indulge yourself?"

"Oh yes. I had a nasty little scenario planned for Foaly—something theatrical involving the Eleven Wonders. But now I have decided that you are worthy of it."

Holly tensed herself. She should go for her gun, there was no other option. But she had to ask; it was fairy nature: "How nasty?"

Opal smiled, and evil was the only word for that expression. "Troll nasty," she said. "And one more thing. I am telling you this because you are about to die, and I want you to hate me at the moment of your death as much as I hate you." Opal paused, allowing the tension to build. "Do you remember the sweet spot on the bomb I strapped to Julius?"

Holly felt as though her heart had expanded to fill her entire chest. "I remember."

Opal's eyes flared. "Well, there wasn't one."

Holly went for her gun, and Merv hit her in the chest with a blue charge. She was asleep before she hit the ground.

CHAPTER 6

TROLL NASTY

Under the Atlantic Ocean, Two Miles off the Kerry Coast, Irish Waters

Ten thousand feet below the surface of the Atlantic, an LEP sub-shuttle was speeding through a minor volcanic trench toward the mouth of a subterranean river. The river led to an LEP shuttleport where the subshuttle's passengers could transfer to a regular craft.

The craft had three passengers and a pilot. The passengers were a dwarf felon and the two Atlantis marshals who were transporting him. Mulch Diggums, the felon in question, was in high spirits for someone in prison clothes. The reason being that his appeal had finally come through, and his lawyer was optimistic that all charges against his client were about to be quashed on a technicality.

Mulch Diggums was a tunnel dwarf who had abandoned the mines in favor of a life of crime. He removed items of value from Mud People's houses and sold them on the black market. In the past few years his destiny had become intertwined with those of Artemis Fowl and Holly Short, and he had played a key part in their adventures. Inevitably this roller-coaster lifestyle had

come crashing down around him as the long arm of the LEP closed in. Before he had been led away to serve the remainder of his sentence, Mulch Diggums was permitted to say good-bye to his human friend.

Artemis had given him two things: one was a note advising him to check the dates on the original search warrant for his cave. The other was a gold medallion to be returned to Artemis in two years. Apparently Artemis wished to resurrect their partnership at that time. Mulch had studied the medallion a thousand times, searching for its secrets, until his constant rubbing wore down the gold plating to reveal a computer disk beneath. Obviously Artemis had recorded a message to himself. A way to return the memories that the LEP had taken from him.

As soon as he had been transported to the Deeps Maximum Security Prison outside Atlantis, Mulch had put in a request for a counsel call. When his state-appointed attorney had grudgingly turned up, Mulch advised him to check the dates on the search warrant leading to his original arrest. Somehow, amazingly, the dates were wrong. According to the LEP computer, Julius Root had searched his cave before obtaining a search warrant. The warrant nullified this and all later arrests. All that remained was a lengthy processing period and one last interview with the arresting officer, and Mulch would be a free dwarf.

Finally, the day had come. Mulch was being shuttled to Police Plaza for his meeting with Julius Root. Fairy law allowed Root one thirty-minute interview to squeeze some kind of confession from Mulch. All the dwarf had to do was stay quiet, and he would be eating vole curry in his favorite dwarf chophouse by dinnertime.

Mulch closed his fist around the medallion. He had no doubt who was pulling the strings here. Somehow, Artemis had hacked the LEP computer and changed his records. The Mud Boy was setting him free.

One of the marshals, a slight elf with Atlantean gills, sucked a slobbery breath through his neck, letting it out through his mouth.

“Hey, Mulch,” he wheezed. “What are you going to do when your appeal is turned down? Are you gonna crack up like a little girl? Or are you gonna take it real stoic, like a dwarf should?”

Mulch smiled, exposing his unfeasibly large number of teeth. “Don’t worry about me, fishboy. I’ll be eating one of your cousins by tonight.”

Generally the sight of Mulch’s tombstone teeth was enough to freeze any smart-aleck comments, but the Marshal was not used to back talk from an inmate.

“Keep at it with the big mouth, dwarf. I have plenty of rocks for you to chew back in the Deeps.”

“In your dreams, fishboy,” retorted Mulch, enjoying the banter after months of kowtowing.

The officer rose to his feet. “It’s Vishby, the name is Vishby.”

“Yes, fishboy, that’s what I said.”

The second officer, a water sprite with batlike wings folded behind his back, chuckled. “Leave him alone, Vishby. Don’t you know who you’re talking to? This here is Mulch Diggums. The most famous thief under the world.”

Mulch smiled, though fame is not a good thing when you’re a thief.

“This guy has a whole list of genius moves to his credit.”

Mulch’s smile faded as he realized that he was about to be the butt of more jokes.

“Yeah, so, first he steals the Jules Rimet trophy from the humans and tries to sell it to an undercover LEP fairy.”

Vishby sat rubbing his hands in glee. “You don’t say? What a brain! How does it fit in that itty-bitty head?”

The sprite strutted along the shuttle’s aisle, delivering his lines like an actor. “So then he lifts some of the Artemis Fowl gold, and lays low in Los Angeles. And do you want to know how he lays low?”

Mulch groaned.

“Tell me,” wheezed Vishby, his gills unable to suck in air fast enough.

“He buys himself a penthouse apartment and starts building a collection of stolen Academy Awards.”

Vishby laughed until his gills flapped.

Mulch could take it no longer. He shouldn’t have to put up with this; he was virtually a free fairy, for goodness’ sake. “Hissself? Hissself? I think you’ve spent a bit too long under water. The pressure is squashing your brain.”

“My brain is squashed?” said the sprite. “I’m not the one who spent a couple of centuries in prison. I’m not the one wearing manacles and a mouth ring.”

It was true. Mulch’s criminal career had not exactly been an unqualified success. He had been caught more than he’d escaped. The LEP was just too technologically advanced to evade. Maybe it was time to go straight, while he still had his looks.

Mulch shook the chains that shackled him to a rail in the holding area. “I won’t be wearing these for long.”

Vishby opened his mouth to respond, then paused. A plasma screen was flashing red on a wall panel. Red was urgent. There was an important message coming through. Vishby hooked an earphone over his ear and turned the screen away from Mulch. As the message was delivered, his face lost every trace of levity. Several moments later, he tossed the headphones on the console.

“It looks like you’ll be wearing those chains for a bit longer than you thought.”

Mulch’s jaw strained against the steel mouth ring. “Why? What’s happened?”

Vishby scratched a strip of gill rot on his neck. “I shouldn’t tell you this, convict, but Commander Root has been murdered.”

Mulch couldn’t have been more shocked if they had connected him to the underworld grid.

“Murdered? How?”

“Explosion,” said Vishby. “Another LEP officer is the prime suspect. Captain Holly Short. She’s missing, presumed dead on the surface, but that hasn’t been confirmed.”

“I’m not a bit surprised,” said the water sprite. “Females are too temperamental for police work. They couldn’t even handle a simple transport job like this.”

Mulch was in shock. He felt as though his brain had snapped its moorings and was spinning in his head. Holly murdered Julius? How could that be possible? It wasn’t possible, simple as that. There must be a mistake. And now Holly was missing, presumed dead. How could this be happening?

“Anyways,” continued Vishby. “We gotta turn this crate around and head back to Atlantis. Obviously your little hearing is being postponed indefinitely, until this entire mess gets sorted out.”

The water sprite slapped Mulch playfully on the cheek. “Tough break, dwarf. Maybe they’ll get the red tape untangled in a couple of years.”

Mulch barely felt the slap, though the words penetrated. A couple of years. Could he take a couple of years in the Deeps? Already his soul cried out for the tunnels. He needed to feel soft

earth between his fingers. His insides needed real roughage to clear them out. And of course, there was a chance that Holly was still alive and needed help. A friend. He had no option but to escape.

Julius dead. It couldn't be true.

Mulch mentally leafed through his dwarf abilities to select the best tool for this escape. He had long since forfeited his magic by breaking most of the Fairy Book's commandments, but dwarfs had extraordinary gifts granted them by evolution. Some of these were common knowledge among the People, but dwarfs were a notoriously secretive race who believed that their survival depended on concealing these talents. It was well known that dwarfs excavated tunnels by ingesting the earth through their unhinged jaws, then ejecting the recycled dirt and air through the other end. Most fairies were aware that dwarfs could drink through their pores, and if they stopped drinking for a while, then these pores were transformed into minisuction cups. Fewer People knew that dwarf spit was luminous, and hardened when layered. And no one knew that a by-product of dwarf flatulence was a methane-producing bacterium called *Methanobrevibacter smithii*, which prevented decompression sickness in deep-sea divers. In fairness, dwarfs didn't know this either; all they knew was that on the rare occasion they found themselves accidentally burrowing into the open sea, the bends did not seem to affect them.

Mulch thought about it for a moment and realized that there was a way to combine all of his talents and get out of here. He had to put his *on-the-hoof* plan into effect immediately, before they went into the deep Atlantic trenches. Once the subshuttle went too deep, he would never make it.

The craft swung in a long arc until it was heading back the way it had come. The pilot would punch the engines as soon as they were outside Irish fishing waters. Mulch began to lick his palms, smoothing the spittle through his halo of wild hair.

Vishby laughed. "What are you doing, Diggums? Cleaning up for your cell mate?"

Mulch would have dearly loved to unhinge his jaw and take a bite out of Vishby, but the mouth ring prevented him from opening his mouth far enough to unhinge. He had to content himself with an insult.

"I may be a prisoner, fishboy, but in ten years I'll be free. You, on the other hand, will be an ugly bottom-feeder for the rest of your life."

Vishby scratched his gill rot furiously. "You just bought yourself six weeks in solitary, mister."

Mulch slathered his fingers with spittle and spread it around the crown of his head, reaching as far back as the manacles would allow. He could feel his hair hardening, clamping onto his head like a helmet. Exactly like a helmet. As he licked, Mulch drew great breaths of air through his nose, storing the air in his intestines. Each breath sucked air out of the pressurized space faster than the pumps could push it back in.

The marshals did not notice this unusual behavior, and even if they had, the pair would doubtless have put it down to nerves. Deep breathing and grooming. Classic nervous traits. Who could blame Mulch for being nervous; after all, he was heading back to the very place criminals had nightmares about.

Mulch licked and breathed, his chest blowing up like a bellows. He felt the pressure fluttering down below, anxious to be released.

Hold on, he told himself. *You will need every bubble of that air.*

The shell on his head crackled audibly now, and if the lights had been dimmed, it would have glowed brightly. The air was growing thin, and Vishby's gills noticed, even if he didn't.

They rippled and flapped, boosting their oxygen intake. Mulch sucked again, a huge gulp of air. A bow plate clanged as the pressure grew.

The sea sprite noticed the change first. "Hey, fishboy."

Vishby's pained expression spoke of years enduring this nickname. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Okay, Vishby, keep your scales on. Is it getting hard to breathe in here? I can't keep my wings up."

Vishby touched his gills; they were flapping like bunting in the wind. "Wow. My gills are going crazy. What's happening here?" He pressed the cabin intercom panel. "Everything all right? Maybe we could boost the air pumps."

The voice that came back was calm and professional, but with an unmistakably anxious undertone. "We're losing pressure in the holding area. I'm trying to nail down the leak now."

"Leak?" squeaked Vishby. "If we depressurize at this depth, the shuttle will crumple like a paper cup."

Mulch took another huge breath.

"Get everyone into the cockpit," the voice declared. "Come through the air lock, right now."

"I don't know," said Vishby. "We're not supposed to untie the prisoner. He's a slippery one."

The slippery one took another breath. And this time a stern plate actually buckled with a crack like thunder.

"Okay, okay. We're coming."

Mulch held out his hands. "Hurry up, fishboy. We don't all have gills."

Vishby swiped his security card along the magnetic strip on Mulch's manacles. The manacles popped open. Mulch was free. As free as you can be in a prison sub with ten thousand crushing feet of water overhead. He stood, taking one last gulp of air.

Vishby noticed the act. "Hey, convict, what are you doing?" he asked. "Are you sucking in all the air?"

Mulch burped. "Who, me? That's ridiculous."

The sprite was equally suspicious. "He's up to something. Look, his hair is all shiny. I bet this is one of those secret dwarf arts."

Mulch tried to look skeptical. "What? Air-sucking and shiny hair? I'm not surprised we kept it a secret."

Vishby squinted at him. His eyes were red rimmed, and his speech was slurred from oxygen deprivation. "You're up to something. Put out your hands."

Being shackled again was not part of the plan. Mulch feigned weakness. "I can't breathe," he said, leaning against the wall. "I hope I don't die in your custody."

This statement caused enough distraction for Mulch to heave one more mighty breath. The stern plate creased inwardly and a silver stress line cracked through the paint. Red pressure lights flared on all over the compartment.

The pilot's voice blared through the speaker. "Get in here!" he shouted, all traces of composure gone. "She's gonna fold."

Vishby grabbed Mulch by the lapels. "What did you do, dwarf?"

Mulch sank to his knees, flicking open the bum-flap at the rear of his prison overalls. He gathered his legs beneath him, ready to move.

"Listen, Vishby," he said. "You're a moron, but not a bad guy, so do like the pilot says

and get in there.”

Vishby’s gills flapped weakly, searching for air. “You’ll be killed, Diggums.”

Mulch winked at him. “I’ve been dead before.”

Mulch could hold on to the gas no longer. His digestive tract was stretched like a magician’s animal balloon. He folded his arms across his chest, aimed the coated tip of his head at the weakened plate, and let the gas loose.

The resultant emission shook the subshuttle to its very rivets, sending Mulch rocketing across the hold. He slammed into the stern plate, smack in the center of the fault line, punching straight through. His speed popped him through into the ocean perhaps half a second before the sudden change in pressure flooded the sub’s chamber. Half a second later, the rear chamber was crushed like a ball of used tinfoil. Vishby and his partner had escaped to the pilot’s cockpit just in time.

Mulch sped toward the surface, a stream of released gas bubbles clipping him along at a rate of several knots. His dwarf lungs fed on the trapped air in his digestive tract, and the luminous helmet of spittle sent out a corona of greenish light to illuminate his way.

Of course they came after him. Vishby and the water sprite were both amphibious Atlantean dwellers. As soon as they jettisoned the wreckage of the rear compartment, the marshals cleared the air lock, finning after their fugitive. But they never had a prayer: Mulch was gas powered, they merely had wings and fins. Whatever pursuit equipment they’d had was at the bottom of the ocean, along with the rear compartment, and the cockpit’s backup engines could barely outrun a crab.

The Atlantis marshals could only watch as their captive jetted toward the surface, mocking them with every bubble from his behind.

Butler’s cell phone had been reduced to so much plastic chips and wiring by the jump from the hotel window. This meant that Artemis could not call him if he needed immediate assistance. The bodyguard double-parked the Hummer outside the first Phonetix store he saw, and purchased a tri-band phone and car kit. Butler activated the phone on the way to the airport and punched in Artemis’s number. No good. The phone was switched off. Butler hung up and tried Fowl Manor. Nobody home and no messages.

Butler breathed deeply, stayed calm, and floored the accelerator. The drive to the airport took less than ten minutes. The giant bodyguard did not waste time returning the Hummer to the rental agency car park, preferring to abandon it in the passenger drop-off area. It would be towed, and he would be fined, but he didn’t have time to worry about it now.

The next plane to Ireland was fully booked, so Butler paid a Polish businessman two thousand euro for his first-class ticket, and in forty-five minutes he was on the Aer Lingus shuttle to Dublin airport. He kept trying Artemis’s number until they started the engines, and switched his phone on again as soon as the wheels touched down.

It was dark by the time he left the Arrivals terminal. Less than half a day had passed since they had broken into the safe-deposit box in Munich’s International Bank. It was incredible that so much could happen in such a short time. Still, when you worked for Artemis Fowl II, the incredible was almost a daily occurrence. Butler had been with Artemis since the day of his birth, just over fourteen years ago, and in that time he had had been dragged into more fantastic situations than the average presidential bodyguard.

The Fowl Bentley was parked in the prestige level of the short-stay car park. Butler slotted his new phone into the car kit and tried Artemis again. No luck. But when he remote-accessed the mailbox at Fowl Manor there was one message. From Artemis. Butler’s grip

tightened on the leather steering wheel. Alive. The boy was alive at least.

The message started well enough, then took a decidedly strange turn. Artemis claimed to be unhurt, but perhaps was suffering from a concussion or post-traumatic stress, because Butler's young charge also claimed that fairies were responsible for the strange missile. A pixie, to be precise. And now he was in the company of an elf, which was apparently a completely different animal to a pixie. Not only that, but the elf was an old friend named Holly, whom they had forgotten. And the pixie was an old enemy who they couldn't remember. It was all very strange. Butler could only conclude that Artemis was trying to tell him something, and that hidden inside this crazed meandering was a message. He would have to analyze the tape as soon as he returned to Fowl Manor.

Then the recording became an unfolding drama. More players entered the range of the Artemis's microphone. The alleged pixie, Opal, and her bodyguards joined the group. Threats were exchanged and Artemis tried to talk his way out. It didn't work. If Artemis had a fault it was that he tended to be very patronizing, even in crisis situations. The pixie, Opal, or whoever it really was, certainly didn't take kindly to being spoken down to. It appeared that she considered herself every inch Artemis's equal, if not his superior. She ordered Artemis silenced in midlecture, and her command was obeyed instantly. Butler experienced a moment of dread, until the pixie stated that Artemis was not dead, merely stunned.

Artemis's new ally had been similarly stunned, but not before she learned of the pixie's theatrical plan. Something to do with the Eleven Wonders, and trolls.

"You cannot be serious," muttered Butler, pulling off the motorway at the exit for Fowl Manor.

To the average passerby it would seem as though several rooms in the manor at the end of the avenue were occupied, but Butler knew that the bulbs in these rooms were all on timers, and would alternate at irregular intervals. There was even a stereo system wired to each room that would pump talk radio into various areas of the house. All measures designed to put off the casual burglar. None of which, Butler knew, would put off a professional thief.

The bodyguard opened the electronic gates and sped up the pebbled driveway. He parked the car directly in front of the main door, not bothering to place it in the shelter of the double garage. He pulled his handgun and clip holster from a magnetic strip under the driver's seat. It was possible that the kidnappers could have sent a representative. He could already be inside the manor.

Butler knew as soon as he opened the front door that something was wrong. The alarm's thirty-second warning should have begun its countdown immediately, but it did not. This was because the entire box was encased in some shiny crackling fiberglass-like substance. Butler poked it gingerly. The stuff glowed and seemed almost organic.

Butler proceeded along the lobby, sticking to the walls. He glanced toward the ceilings. Green lights winked in the shadows. At least the cctv cameras were still working. Even if the manor's visitors had left, he could get a look at them on the security tapes.

The bodyguard's foot brushed against something. He glanced down. A large crystal bowl lay on the rug, the remains of a sherry trifle slopping in its base. Beside it lay a wad of gravy-encrusted tinfoil. A hungry kidnapper? Five feet on he found an empty Moet champagne bottle and a decimated chicken carcass. Just how many intruders had been here?

The remnants of food formed a trail that led toward the study. Butler followed it upstairs, stepping over a half-eaten T-bone steak, two chunks of fruitcake, and a Pavlova shell. A light shone from the study doorway, casting a small shadow into the hall. There was someone in the

study. A not very tall someone. Artemis?

Butler's spirits rose for a second when he heard his employer's voice, but they sank just as quickly. He recognized those words; he had listened to them himself in the car. The intruder was playing the taped message on the answering machine.

Butler crept into the study, stepping so lightly that his footfalls would not have alerted a deer. Even from the back, this intruder was a strange fellow. He was barely three feet tall, with a stocky torso and thick muscled limbs. His entire body appeared to be covered with wild wiry hair that seemed to move independently. His head was encased in a helmet of the same glowing substance that had incapacitated the alarm box. The intruder wore a blue jumpsuit with a flap in the seat. The flap was half unbuttoned, giving Butler a view of a hairy rear end that seemed unsettlingly familiar.

The taped message was coming to an end.

Artemis's abductor was describing what was in store for the Irish boy. "Oh yes," she said. "I had a nasty little scenario planned for Foaly—something theatrical involving the Eleven Wonders. But now I have decided that you are worthy of it."

"How nasty?" asked Artemis's new ally, Holly.

"Troll nasty," responded Opal.

The Fowl Manor intruder made a loud sucking noise, then discarded the remains of an entire rack of lamb.

"Not good," he said. "This is really bad."

Butler cocked his weapon, aiming it squarely at the intruder.

"It's about to get worse," he said.

Butler sat the intruder in one of the study's leather armchairs, then pulled a second chair around to face him. From the front, this little creature looked even stranger. His face was basically a mass of wirelike hair with eyes and teeth. The eyes occasionally glowed red like a fox's, and the teeth looked like two rows of picket fencing. This was no hairy child: this was an adult creature of some sort.

"Don't tell me," sighed Butler. "You're an elf."

The creature sat up straight. "How dare you," he cried. "I am a dwarf, as you very well know."

Butler thought back to Artemis's confusing message. "Let me guess. I used to know you, but somehow I forgot. Oh yes, the fairy police wiped my mind."

Mulch burped. "Correct, you're not as slow as you look."

Butler raised the gun. "This is still cocked, so less of the lip, little man."

"Pardon me, I didn't realize we were enemies now."

Butler leaned forward in his chair. "We were friends?"

Mulch thought about it. "Not at first, no. But I think you grew to love me for my charm and noble character."

Butler sniffed. "And personal hygiene?"

"That's not fair," objected Mulch. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to get here? I escaped from a sub-shuttle and swam a couple of miles in freezing cold water. Then I had to break into a blacksmith's in the west of Ireland, about the only place they still have blacksmiths, and snip off my mouth ring. Don't ask. *Then* I burrowed across the entire country to find out the truth about this affair. And when I get here one of the few Mud Men I don't feel like taking a bite out of is pointing a gun at me."

"Hold on a minute," said Butler. "I need to get a tissue to wipe my eyes."

“You don’t believe any of this, do you?”

“Do I believe in fairy police and pixie conspiracies and tunneling dwarfs? No, I don’t.”

Mulch slowly reached inside his jumpsuit and pulled out the gold-plated computer disk. “Maybe this will open your mind.”

Butler turned on one of Artemis’s Powerbooks, making sure the laptop was not connected to any other computer by wire or infrared. If this disk did contain a virus, then they would only lose one hard drive. He cleaned the disk off with a spray and cloth and slid it into the multdrive.

The computer asked for a password.

“This disk is locked,” said Butler. “What’s the password?”

Mulch shrugged, a French baguette in each hand. “Hey, I don’t know. It’s Artemis’s disk.”

Butler frowned. If this really was Artemis’s disk, then Artemis’s password would open it. He typed in three words, *Aurum est potestas*: Gold is power. The family motto. Seconds later the locked disk icon was replaced by a window containing two folders. One was labeled Artemis, the other Butler. Before the bodyguard opened either, he ran a virus check, just in case. The check came up clean.

Feeling strangely nervous, Butler opened the folder with his name on it. There were more than a hundred files on it. Mostly text files, but some video, too. The largest file was labeled *view me first*. Butler double-clicked that file.

A small QuickTime player opened on the screen. In the picture, Artemis was seated at the very desk that the laptop rested on. Bizarre. Butler clicked the PLAY triangle.

“Hello, Butler,” said Artemis’s voice, or a very sophisticated fake. “If you are watching this, then our good friend Mister Diggums has come through.”

“You hear that?” spat Mulch through a mouthful of bread. “*Good friend* Mister Diggums.”

“Quiet!”

“Everything you think you know about this planet is about to change,” continued Artemis. “Humans are not the only sentient beings on Earth, in fact we are not even the most technologically advanced. Below the surface are several species of fairy. Most are possibly primates, but I have not had the opportunity to conduct medical examinations as of yet.”

Butler could not hide his impatience. “Please, Artemis. Get to the point.”

“But more of that at another time,” said Artemis, as if he had heard. “There is a possibility that you are watching this at a time of peril, so I must arm you with all the knowledge that we have gathered during our adventures with the Lower Elements Police.”

Lower Elements Police? thought Butler. This is all a fake. Somehow it’s fake.

Again, the video-Artemis seemed to read his thoughts. “In order to verify the fantastical facts that I am about to reveal, I will say one word. Just one. A word that I could not possibly know unless you had told me. Something you said as you lay dying, before Holly Short cured you with her magic. What would you tell me if you lay dying, old friend. What would be the single word you would say?”

I would tell you my first name, thought Butler. Something only two other people in the world know. Something completely forbidden by bodyguard etiquette, unless it is too late to matter.

Artemis leaned in to the camera. “Your name, my old friend, is Domovoi.”

Butler was reeling. Oh my God, he thought. It’s true, it’s all true.

Something began to happen in his brain. Disjointed images flashed through his

subconscious, releasing repressed memories. The false past was swept away by blinding truth. An electric connect-the-dots jolted through his cranium, making everything clear. It all made sense now. He felt old because the healing had aged him. He found it difficult to breath sometimes because Kevlar strands had been woven into the skin over his chest wound. He remembered Holly's kidnapping, and the B'wa Kell goblin revolution. He remembered Holly and Julius, the centaur Foaly, and of course, Mulch Diggums. There was no need to read the other files; one word had been enough. He remembered everything.

Butler studied the dwarf with fresh eyes. Everything was so familiar now. The vibrating frizz of hair, the bowlegged stance, the smell. He sprang from his chair and strode across the room to Mulch, who was busy raiding the study's minifridge.

"Mulch, you old reprobate. Good to see you."

"Now he remembers," said the dwarf without turning around. "Do you have anything to say?"

Butler glanced at the open bum-flap. "Yes. Don't point that thing at me. I've seen the damage it can do."

The bodyguard's smile froze on his face as he remembered one detail of Artemis's phone message.

"Julius Root. I heard something about a bomb."

Mulch turned from the fridge, his beard laced with a cocktail of dairy products.

"Yes. Julius is gone. I can't believe it. He's been chasing me for so many years."

Butler felt a terrific weariness weigh on his shoulders. He had lost too many comrades over the years.

"And what's more," continued Mulch. "Holly is accused of murdering him."

"That's just not possible. We have to find them."

"Now you're talking," said the dwarf, slamming the fridge door. "Do you have a plan?"

"Yes. Find Holly and Artemis."

Mulch rolled his eyes. "Pure genius. It's a wonder you need Artemis at all."

Now that the dwarf had eaten his fill, the two reacquainted friends sat at the conference table and brought each other up to speed.

Butler cleaned his gun as he spoke. He often did this in times of stress. It was a comfort thing.

"So, Opal Koboi somehow gets out of prison and hatches this complicated plot to revenge herself on everyone who put her in there. Not only that, but she sets Holly up to take the blame."

"Remind you of anyone?" asked the dwarf.

Butler polished the Sig Sauer's slide. "Artemis may be a criminal, but he is not evil."

"Who said anything about Artemis?"

"Well what about you, Mulch? Why didn't Opal try to kill you?"

"Ah well," sighed the dwarf, ever the martyr. "The LEP didn't advertise my involvement. It wouldn't do to have the proud officers of our police force tarnished by association with a known criminal."

Butler nodded. "It makes sense. So you're safe for now and Artemis and Holly are alive. But Opal has something planned for them. Something to do with trolls and the Eleven Wonders. Any ideas?"

"We both know about trolls, right?"

Butler nodded again. He had fought a troll not so long ago. Without a doubt the toughest

battle he had ever been involved in. He couldn't believe the LEP had managed to wipe it from his mind.

"But what about the Eleven Wonders?"

"The Eleven Wonders is a theme park in Haven's old-town district. Fairies are obsessed with Mud Men, so one bright spark billionaire thought it would be a great idea to build smaller models of the human wonders of the world and put them all in one place. It did okay for a few years, but I think looking at those buildings made the People remember just how much they missed the surface."

Butler ran through a list in his head. "But there are only seven wonders in the world."

"There used to be eleven," said Mulch. "Trust me, I have photographs. Anyway, the park is closed down now. That whole area of the city has been abandoned for years; the tunnels are not safe. And the whole place is overrun by trolls." He stopped suddenly, the horror of what he had just said hitting home. "Oh gods. Trolls."

Butler began to quickly reassemble his weapon. "We need to get down there right now."

"Impossible," said Mulch. "I can't even begin to think how."

Butler dragged the dwarf to his feet and propelled him toward the door. "Maybe not. But you know someone.

People in your business always know someone."

Mulch ground his teeth thinking about it. "You know, there is someone. A sprite who owes Holly his life. But whatever I persuade him to do for us won't be legal."

Butler grabbed a bag of weaponry from a cabinet. "Good," he said. "Illegal is always faster."

CHAPTER 7

THE TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS

The Lower Elements

Opal Koboi's shuttle was a concept model that had never gone into mass production. It was years ahead of anything on the market, but its skin of stealth ore and cam-foil made the cost of such a vehicle so exorbitant that even Opal Koboi couldn't have afforded one without the government grants that had helped to pay for it.

Scant secured the prisoners into the passenger bay, while Merv piloted them across to Scotland, then underground through a mountain river in the highlands. Opal busied herself making sure that her other plan, the one involving world domination, was proceeding smoothly.

She closed the screen on her video phone and dialed a connection to Sicily.

The person at the other end picked up in the middle of the first ring. "Belinda, my dear. Is it you?"

The man who had answered was in his late forties, with Latin good looks and gray-streaked black hair framing his tanned face. He wore a white lab coat over an open-necked striped Versace shirt.

"Yes, Papa. It's me. Don't worry, I am safe."

Opal's voice was layered with the hypnotic *mesmer*. The poor human was utterly in her power, as he had been for over a month.

"When are you coming home, my dear? I miss you."

"Today, Papa, in a few hours. How is everything there?"

The man smiled dreamily. “*Molto bene*. Wonderful. The weather is fine. We can take a drive to the mountains. Perhaps I can teach you to ski.”

Opal frowned impatiently. “Listen to me, *idiot* . . . Papa. How is everything with the probe? Are we on schedule?”

For a moment, a flash of annoyance wrinkled the Italian’s brow, then he was bewitched again. “Yes, my dear. Everything is on schedule. The explosive pods are being buried today. The probe’s systems’ check was a resounding success.”

Opal clapped her hands, the picture of a delighted daughter. “Excellent, Papa. You are so good to your little Belinda. I will be with you soon.”

“Hurry home, my dear,” said the man, utterly lost without the creature he believed to be his daughter.

Opal ended the call. “Fool,” she said contemptuously. But Giovanni Zito would be allowed to live at least until the probe he was constructing to her specifications punctured the Lower Elements. Now that she had spoken to Zito, Opal was eager to concentrate on the *probe* portion of her plan. Revenge was certainly sweet, but it was also a distraction. Perhaps she should just dump these two from the shuttle and let the earth’s magma core have them.

“Merv,” she barked. “How long to the theme park?”

Merv checked the instruments on the shuttle’s dashboard.

“We’ve just entered the main chute network, Miss Koboi. Five hours,” he called over his shoulder. “Perhaps less.”

Five hours, mused Opal, curling in her bucket seat like a contented cat. She could spare five hours.

Some time later, Artemis and Holly were stirring in their seats. Scant helped them into consciousness with a couple of jolts from a buzz baton.

“Welcome back to the land of the condemned,” said Opal. “How do you like my shuttle?”

The craft was impressive, even if it was ferrying Artemis and Holly to their deaths. The seats were covered with illegally harvested fur, and the décor was plusher than your average palace. There were small entertainment hologram cubes suspended from the ceiling, in case the passengers wanted to watch a movie.

Holly began to squirm when she noticed what she was sitting on. “Fur! You animal.”

“No,” said Opal. “You’re *sitting* on the animals. As I told you, I am human now. And that is what humans do, skin animals for their own comfort. Isn’t that right, Master Fowl?”

“Some do,” said Artemis coolly. “Not me personally.”

“Really, Artemis,” said Opal archly. “I hardly think that qualifies you for sainthood. From what I hear, you’re just as eager to exploit the People as I am.”

“Perhaps. I don’t remember.”

Opal rose from her seat and fixed herself a light salad from the buffet. “Of course, they mind-wiped you. But surely you must remember now? Not even your subconscious could deny that this is happening.”

Artemis concentrated. He could remember something. Vague out of focus images. Nothing very specific. “I do remember something.”

Opal lifted her eyes from her plate. “Yes?”

Artemis fixed her with a cool stare. “I remember how Foaly defeated you before with superior intellect. I am certain he will do it again.”

Of course, Artemis had not truly remembered this; he was simply repeating what Holly

had told him. But the statement had the desired effect.

“That ridiculous centaur!” shrieked Opal, hurling her plate against the wall. “He was lucky, and I was hampered by that idiot Cudgeon. Not this time. This time I am the architect of my own fate. And of yours.”

“And what is it this time?” Artemis asked mockingly. “Another orchestrated rebellion? Or perhaps a mechanical dinosaur?”

Opal’s face grew white with rage. “Is there no end to your impudence, Mud Boy? No small-scale rebellions this time. I have a grander vision. I will lead the humans to the People. When the two worlds collide, there will be a war and my adopted people will win.”

“You’re a fairy, Koboi,” interjected Holly. “One of us. Rounded ears don’t change that. Don’t you think the humans will notice when you don’t get any taller?”

Opal patted Holly’s cheek almost affectionately. “My poor, dear, underpaid police officer. Don’t you think I thought of all this while I stewed in that coma for almost a year? Don’t you think I thought of everything? I have always known humans would discover us eventually, so I have prepared.” Opal leaned over, parting her jet-black hair to reveal a magically fading three-inch scar on her scalp. “Getting my ears rounded wasn’t the only surgery I had done. I also had something inserted in my skull.”

“A pituitary gland,” guessed Artemis.

“Very good, Mud Boy. A rather tiny artificial human pituitary gland. HGH is one of seven hormones secreted by the pituitary.”

“HGH?” interrupted Holly.

“Human growth hormone,” explained Artemis.

“Exactly. As the name implies, HGH enhances the growth of various organs and tissues, especially muscle and bone. In three months, I have already grown half an inch. Oh, maybe I’ll never make the basketball team, but no one will ever believe that I am a fairy.”

“You’re no fairy,” said Holly bitterly. “At heart you’ve always been human.”

“That’s supposed to be an insult, I suppose. Maybe I deserve that, considering what I am about to do to you. In an hour’s time, there won’t be enough of you two remaining to fill the booty box.”

This was a term that Artemis had not heard before. “Booty box? That sounds like a pirate expression.”

Opal opened a secret panel in the flooring, revealing a small compartment underneath. “This is a booty box. The term was coined by vegetable smugglers more than eight thousand years ago. A secret compartment that would go unnoticed by customs officials. Of course, these days, with X-ray, infrared, and motion-sensitive cameras, a booty box isn’t much good.” Opal smiled slyly, like a child who has put one over on her teacher. “Unless of course the box is completely constructed from stealth ore, refrigerated, and has internal projectors to fool X-ray and infrared. The only way to detect this booty box is to put your foot into it. So, even if the LEP did board my shuttle, they would not find whatever it is I am choosing to smuggle. Which in this case is a jar of chocolate truffles. Hardly illegal, but the cooler is full. Chocolate truffles are my passion, you know. All that time I was away, truffles were one of two things I craved. The other was revenge.”

Artemis yawned. “How fascinating. A secret compartment. What a genius you are. How can you fail to take over the world with a *booty box* full of truffles?”

Opal smoothed Artemis’s hair back from his forehead. “Make all the jokes you want, Mud Boy. Words are all you have now.”

Minutes later, Merv brought the stealth shuttle in to land. Artemis and Holly were cuffed and led down the retractable gangplank. They emerged into a giant tunnel dimly illuminated by Glo-Strips. Most of the lighting panels were shattered, the rest were on their last legs. This section of the chute had once been part of a thriving metropolis, but now was completely deserted and derelict. Demolition notices were pasted across various drooping billboards.

Opal pointed to one. "This whole place is being torn down in a month. We just made the deadline."

"Lucky us," muttered Holly.

Merv and Scant prodded them wordlessly along the chute with their gun barrels. The road surface beneath their feet was buckled and cracked. Swear toads clustered in damp patches, spouting obscenities. The roadside was lined with abandoned concession stands and souvenir shops. In one window, human dolls were arranged in various warlike poses.

Artemis stopped in spite of the gun at his back. "Is that how you see us?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said Opal. "You're much worse than that, but the manufacturers don't want to scare the children."

Several huge hemispherical structures squatted at the end of the tunnel. Each one the size of a football stadium. They were constructed of hexagonal panels welded together along the seams. Some panels were opaque, others were transparent. Each panel was roughly the dimensions of a small house.

Before the hemispheres was a huge arch, with strips of tattered gold leaf hanging from its frame. A sign hung from the arch, emblazoned with six-foot-high Gnommish letters.

"The Eleven Wonders of the Human World," declared Opal theatrically. "Ten thousand years of civilization, and you only manage to produce eleven so-called wonders."

Artemis tested his cuffs. They were tightly fastened. "You know of course that there are only seven wonders on the official list."

"I know that," said Opal testily. "But humans are so narrow-minded. Fairy scholars studied video footage and decided to include the Abu Simbel Temple in Egypt, the Moai Statues in Rapa Nui, the Borobudur Temple in Indonesia, and the Throne Hall of Persepolis in Iran."

"If humans are so narrow-minded," commented Holly. "I'm surprised that you want to be one of them."

Opal passed through the arch. "Well, I would prefer to be a pixie, no offense Artemis, but the Fairy People are shortly to be wiped out. I shall be seeing to that personally as soon as I have dropped you off in your new home. In ten minutes I'll be on my way to the island, watching you two get torn apart on the shuttle monitors."

They proceeded through the theme park, past the first hemisphere, which contained a two-thirds scale model of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Several of the hexagonal panels had been ripped out and Artemis could see the remains of the model through the gaps. It was an impressive sight, made even more so by the scores of shaggy creatures scrambling across the pyramid's slopes.

"Trolls," explained Opal. "They have taken over the exhibits. But don't worry, they are extremely territorial and won't attack unless you approach the pyramid."

Artemis was beyond amazement at this point, but even so, the sight of these magnificent carnivores preying on one another was enough to speed his heart up a few beats. He paused to study the nearest specimen. It was a terrifying creature: at least eight feet tall, with grimy dreadlocks swinging about its massive head. The troll's fur-matted arms swung below its knees, and two curved serrated tusks jutted from its lower jaw. The beast watched them pass, night eyes

glowing red in their sockets.

The group arrived at the second exhibit. The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. The hologram by the entrance displayed a revolving image of the Turkish building.

Opal read the history panel. "Interesting," she said. "Now, why do you suppose someone would name a male child after a female goddess?"

"It's my father's name," said Artemis wearily, having explained this a hundred times. "It can be used for girls or boys, and means *the hunter*. Rather apt, don't you think? It may interest you to know that your chosen human name, Belinda, means beautiful snake. Also rather fitting. Half of it, at any rate."

Opal pointed a tiny finger at Artemis's nose. "You are a very annoying creature, Fowl. I do hope all humans are not like you."

She nodded at Scant.

"Spray them," she ordered.

Scant took a small atomizer from his pocket and doused Holly and Artemis liberally with the contents. The liquid was yellow and foul smelling.

"Troll pheromones," said Scant, almost apologetically. "These trolls will take one whiff of you and go absolutely crazy. To them you smell like females in heat. When they find out you're not, they'll tear you into a thousand little bits, then chew on the pieces. We've had all of the broken panels repaired, so there's no escape. You can jump in the river if you like; the scent should wash off in about a thousand years. And, Captain Short, I have removed the wings from your suit and shorted out the cam-foil. I did leave the heating coils. After all, one deserves a sporting chance."

A lot of use heating coils will be against trolls, thought Holly glumly.

Merv was checking the entrance through one of the transparent panels. "Okay. We're clear."

The pixie opened the main entrance by remote. Distant howls resonated from inside the exhibit. Artemis could see several trolls brawling on the steps of the replica temple. He and Holly would be torn apart.

The Brill brothers propelled them into the hemisphere.

"Best of luck," said Opal, as the door slid shut. "Remember, you're not alone. We'll be watching you on the cameras."

The door clanged shut ominously. Seconds later the electronic locking panel began to fizzle, as one of the Brill brothers melted it from the outside. Artemis and Holly were locked in with a bunch of amorous trolls and smelled irresistible to them.

The Temple of Artemis exhibit was a scale model that had been constructed with painstaking accuracy, complete with animatronic humans going about their daily business as they would have been in 400 B.C. Most of the human models had been stripped to the wires by the trolls, but some moved jerkily along their tracks, bringing their gifts to the goddess. Any robot whose path brought them too close to a pack of trolls was pounced on and torn to shreds. It was a grim preview of Artemis and Holly's own fate.

There was only one food supply. The trolls themselves. Cubs and stragglers were picked off by the bulls and butchered with teeth, claws, and tusks. The pack leader took the lion's share, then tossed the carcass to the baying pack. If the trolls were confined here much longer, they would wipe themselves out.

Holly shouldered Artemis roughly to the ground. "Quickly," she said. "Roll in the mud. Cover yourself, smother the scent."

Artemis did as he was told, scooping mud over himself with his manacled hands. Any spots he missed were quickly slathered by Holly. He did the same for her. In moments the pair were almost unrecognizable.

Artemis was feeling something he could not remember having felt before: absolute fear. His hands shook, rattling the chains. There was no room in his brain for analytical thought. I can't, he thought. I can't do anything.

Holly took charge, dragging him to his feet and propelling him to a cluster of fake merchants' tents beside a fast-flowing river. They crouched behind the ragged canvas, peering at the trolls through long claw rents in the material. Two animatronic merchants sat on mats before the tents, their baskets brimming with gold and ivory statuettes of the goddess Artemis. Neither model had a head. One of the heads lay in the dust several feet away, its artificial brain poking out through a bite hole.

"We need to get the cuffs off," said Holly urgently.

"What?" mumbled Artemis.

Holly shook her manacles in his face. "We need to get these off now! The mud will protect us for a minute, then the trolls will be on our trail. We have to get in the water, and with cuffs on we'll drown in the current."

Artemis's eyes had lost their focus. "The current?"

"Snap out of it, Artemis," Holly hissed into his face. "Remember your gold? You can't collect it if you're dead. The great Artemis Fowl, collapsing at the first sign of trouble. We've been in worse scrapes than this before." Not exactly true, but the Mud Boy couldn't remember, could he?

Artemis composed himself. There was no time for a calming meditation; he would simply have to repress the emotions he was experiencing. Very unhealthy, psychologically speaking, but better than being reduced to chunks of meat between a troll's teeth.

He studied the cuffs. Some form of ultralight plastic polymer. There was a digit pad in the center, positioned so the wearer could not reach the digits.

"How many numbers?" he said.

"What?"

"In the code for the cuffs. You are a police officer. Surely you know how many numbers in the code for handcuffs."

"Three," replied Holly. "But there are so many possibilities."

"Possibilities but not probabilities," said Artemis, irritating even when his life was in danger. "Statistically, thirty-eight percent of humans don't bother changing the factory code on digital locks. We can only hope that fairies are equally negligent."

Holly frowned. "Opal is anything but negligent."

"Perhaps. But her two little henchfairies might not be as attentive to detail."

Artemis held out his cuffs to Holly. "Try three zeroes."

Holly did so, using a thumb. The red light stayed red.

"Nines. Three nines."

Again the light stayed red.

Holly quickly tried all ten digits three times. None had any effect.

Artemis sighed. "Very well. Triple digits was a bit too obvious, I suppose. Are there any other three-digit numbers that are burned into fairy consciousness? Something all fairies would know, and wouldn't be likely to forget?"

Holly racked her brain. "Nine five one. The Haven area code."

“Try it.”

She did. No good.

“Nine five eight. The Atlantis code.”

Again no good.

“Those numbers are too regional,” snapped Artemis. “What is the one number that every male, female, and infant knows?”

Holly’s eyes widened. “Of course. Of course. Nine zero nine. The police emergency number. It’s on the corner of every billboard under the world.”

Artemis noticed something. The howling had stopped. The trolls had ceased fighting and were sniffing the air. The pheromones were in the breeze, drawing the beasts like puppets on strings. In eerie unison, their heads turned toward Holly and Artemis’s hiding place.

Artemis shook his manacles. “Try it quickly.”

Holly did. The light winked green, and the cuffs popped open.

“Good. Excellent. Now let me do yours.”

Artemis’s fingers paused over the keyboard. “I don’t read the fairy language or numerals.”

“You do. In fact, you are the only human who does,” said Holly. “You just don’t remember. The pad is standard layout. Zero to nine. Left to right.”

“Nine zero nine,” muttered Artemis, pressing the appropriate keys. Holly’s cuffs popped on the first try, which was fortunate because there would be no time for a second.

The trolls were coming, loping from the temple’s steps with frightening speed and coordination. They used the weight of their shaggy arms to swing forward, while simultaneously straightening muscular legs. This launch method could take them up to twenty feet in a single bound. The animals landed on their knuckles, swinging their legs underneath for the next jump.

It was an almost petrifying sight. A score of crazed carnivores, jostling their way down a shallow sandy incline. The larger males took the easy way down, charging right through the ravine. Adolescents and older males stuck to the slopes, wary of casual bites and scything tusks. The trolls crashed through mannequins and scenery, heading straight for the tent. Dreadlocks swung with every step, and eyes glowed red in the half light. They held their heads back so their highest point was their nose. Noses that were leading them directly to Holly and Artemis. And what was worse, Holly and Artemis could smell the trolls, too.

Holly stuck both pairs of cuffs into her belt. They had charge packs and could be adapted for heat or even weapons, if Holly lived long enough to use them.

“Okay, Mud Boy. Into the water.”

Artemis did not argue or question; there was no time for that. He could only assume that, like many animals, trolls were not water lovers. He ran toward the river, feeling the ground below his feet vibrate with a hundred feet and fists. The howling had started again too, but it had a more reckless tone, mindless and brutal, as if whatever self-control the trolls had was now gone.

Artemis hustled to catch up to Holly. She was ahead of him, lithe and limber, bending low to scoop up one of the fake plastic logs from a campfire. Artemis did the same, tucking it under his arm. They could be in the water for a long time.

Holly dived in, gracefully arcing through the air before entering the water with barely a splash. Artemis stumbled after her. All this running for one’s life was not what he was built for. His brain was big, but his limbs were slight, which was exactly the opposite of what you needed when trolls were at your heels.

The water was lukewarm, yet the mouthful Artemis inadvertently swallowed tasted remarkably sweet. No pollutants, he supposed, with that small portion of his brain that was still thinking rationally. Something tagged his ankle, slicing through sock and flesh. Then he kicked into the river, and he was clear. A trail of hot blood lingered for a moment, before being whipped away by the current.

Holly was treading water in the center of the river. Her auburn hair stood up in slick spikes, and her suit crackled to match the background where the mud had been washed off.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

Artemis shook his head. No breath for words.

Holly noticed his ankle, which was trailing behind him.

“Blood, and I don’t have a drop of magic left to heal you. That blood is almost as bad as pheromones. We have to get out of here.”

On the bank the trolls were literally hopping mad. They head-butted the earth repeatedly, drumming their fists in complex rhythms.

“Mating ritual,” explained Holly. “I think they like us.”

The current was strong out in the center of the river, and drew the pair quickly downstream. The trolls followed along, some hurling small missiles into the water. One clipped Holly’s plastic log, almost dislodging her.

She spat out a mouthful of water. “We need a plan, Artemis. That’s your department. I got us this far.”

“Oh yes, well done, you,” said Artemis, having apparently recovered his sense of sarcasm. He raked wet strands of hair from his eyes and cast around, beyond the melee on the waterline. The temple was huge, throwing an elongated multipronged shadow across the desert area. The interior was wide open, with no obvious shelter from the trolls. The only deserted spot was the temple roof.

“Can trolls climb?” he spluttered.

Holly followed his gaze. “Yes, if they have to, like big monkeys. But only if they have to.”

Artemis frowned. “If only I could remember,” he said. “If only I knew what I know.”

Holly kicked over to him, grasping his collar. They swirled in the white water, bubbles and froth squeezing between their logs.

“If only is no good, Mud Boy. We need a plan before the filter.”

“The filter?”

“This is an artificial river. It’s filtered through a central tank.”

A bulb went on in Artemis’s brain. “A central tank. That’s our way out.”

“We’ll be killed! I have no idea how long we’ll be underwater.”

Artemis took one last look around, measuring, calculating. “Given the present circumstances, there is no other option.”

Up ahead, the currents began to circle, pulling in any rubbish picked up from the banks. A small whirlpool formed in the middle of the river. The sight of it seemed to calm the trolls. They gave up on the butting and banging, and settled down to watch. Some moved along the bank; these would later prove to be the clever ones.

“We follow the current,” shouted Artemis over the hiss. “We follow it and hope.”

“That’s it? That’s your brilliant plan?” Holly’s suit crackled as the water wormed its way into the circuits.

“It’s not so much a plan as a lifesaving strategy,” retorted Artemis. He would have said

more but the river interrupted him, snatching him away from his elfin companion into the whirlpool.

He felt about as significant as a twig in the face of such power. If he tried to resist the water, it would slap the air from his lungs like a bully slapping his victim. Artemis's chest was compressed; even when his gasping mouth was above water, he could not force adequate amounts of air into his lungs. His brain was starved of oxygen. He couldn't think straight. Everything was curved. The swirl of his body, the sweep of the water. White circles on blue ones on green ones. His feet dancing little Möbius strip patterns below his body. Riverdance. Ha-ha.

Holly was before him, pinioning the two logs between them. A makeshift raft. She shouted something, but it was lost. There was only water now. Water and confusion.

She held up three fingers. Three seconds. Then they were going under. Artemis breathed as deeply as his constricted chest would allow. Two fingers now. Then one.

Artemis and Holly let go of their logs and the current sucked them under like spiders down a drain. Artemis fought to hold on to his air, but the buffeting water squeezed it from between his lips. Bubbles spiraled behind them, racing for the surface.

The water was not so deep or dark. But it was fast and would not allow many images to stand still long enough to be identified. Holly's face flashed past Artemis, but all he could make out were big hazel eyes.

The whirlpool's funnel grew narrower, forcing Holly and Artemis together. They were swept diagonally down in a flurry of bumping torsos and flapping limbs. They pressed their foreheads together, finding some comfort in each other's eyes. But it was short lived. Their progress was brutally cut short by a metal grille covering the drainage pipe. They slammed into it, feeling the sharp wire leave indents on their skin.

Holly slapped at the grille, then wormed her fingers through the holes. The grille was shiny and new. Fresh weld marks dotted its rim. This was new and everything else was old. Kobo!

Something nudged Holly's arm. An aqua-pod. It was anchored to the grille by a plastic tie. Opal's face filled the small screen sealed inside, and her grin filled most of her face. She was saying something again and again on a short loop. The words were inaudible over the din of sluice and bubble, but the meaning was clear: *I beat you again.*

Holly grabbed the aqua-pod, ripping it from its tether. The effort threw her from the slipstream into the relatively calm surrounding waters. Her strength was gone, and she had no option but to go where the river led her. Artemis dragged himself from the flat face of the grille, using the last of his oxygen to kick his legs, just twice.

He was free of the whirlpool, floating along after Holly toward a dark mound farther down the river. Air, he thought with keen desperation, I need to breathe. Not soon. Now. If not now, never.

Artemis broke the surface mouth first. His throat was sucking down air before the water cleared. The first breath came back up, laced with fluid, but the second was clear, and the third. Artemis felt the strength flow back into his limbs like mercury in his veins.

Holly was safe. Lying on a dark island in the river. Her chest heaved like a bellows and the aqua-pod lay beneath her splayed fingers.

"Uh-uh," said Opal Kobo! on-screen. "So-o-o predictable." She said it over and over, until Artemis struggled from the shallow water, climbed on the mound, and found the MUTE button.

"I am really starting to dislike her," he panted. "She may come to regret little touches like

the underwater television, because it's things like this that give me the motivation to get out of here."

Holly sat up, looking around. They were sitting on a mound of rubbish. Artemis guessed that since Opal had welded the grille across the filter pipe, the current had swept everything that the trolls discarded to this shallow spot. A small island of junk in the river bend. There were disembodied robot heads on the heap, along with battered statues and troll remains. Troll skulls with the thick wedge of forehead bone and rotting pelts.

At least those particular trolls could not eat them. The dangerous trolls that had followed them were working themselves up into a lather again along the banks on both sides. But there was at least twenty feet of six-inch-deep water separating them from the land. They were safe, for the moment.

Artemis felt memories attempting to break through to the surface. He was on the verge of remembering everything, he was certain of it. He sat completely still, willing it to happen. Unconnected images flashed behind his eyes: a mountain of gold, green scaly creatures snorting fireballs, Butler packed in ice. But the images slid from his consciousness like drops of water off a windshield.

Holly sat up. "Anything?"

"Maybe," said Artemis. "Something. I'm not sure. Everything is happening so fast. I need time to meditate."

"We're out of time," said Holly, climbing to the top of the junk pile. Skulls cracked beneath her feet. "Look."

Artemis turned toward the left bank. One of the trolls had picked up a large rock and raised it over his head. Artemis tried to make himself small. If that rock hit, they would both be gravely injured, at the very least.

The troll grunted like a tennis pro serving, spinning the rock into the river. It barely missed the pile, landing with a huge splash in the shallow waters.

"A poor shot," said Holly.

Artemis frowned. "I doubt it."

A second troll grabbed a missile, and a third. Soon all the brutes were hurling rocks, robot parts, sticks, or whatever they could get their hands on toward the rubbish heap. Not one hit the shivering pair huddled on the pile.

"They keep missing," said Holly. "Every one of them."

Artemis's bones ached from cold, fear, and sustained tension.

"They're not trying to hit us," he said. "They're building a bridge."

Tara, Ireland; Dawn

The fairy shuttleport in Tara was the biggest in Europe. More than eight thousand tourists a year passed through its X-ray arches. Thirty thousand cubic feet of terminal concealed beneath an overgrown hillock in the middle of the McGraney farm. It was a marvel of subterranean architecture.

Mulch Diggums, fugitive kleptomaniac dwarf, was pretty marvelous himself, in the subterranean area. Butler drove the Fowl Bentley north from the manor, and on Mulch's instructions, slowed the luxury car down five hundred yards from the shuttleport's camouflaged entrance. This allowed Mulch to dive from the rear door straight into the earth. He quickly submerged below a layer of rich Irish soil. The best in the world.

Mulch knew the shuttleport layout well. He had once broken his cousin Nord out of police custody here, when the LEP had arrested him on industrial pollution charges. A vein of

clay ran right up to the shuttleport wall, and if you knew where to look, there was a sheet of metal casing that had been worn thin by years of Irish damp. But on this particular occasion, Mulch was not interested in evading the LEP; quite the opposite.

Mulch surfaced inside the holographic bush that hid the shuttleport's service entrance. He climbed from his tunnel, shook the clay from his behind, got all the tunnel wind out of his system a bit more noisily than was absolutely necessary, and waited.

Five seconds later, the entrance hatch slid across, and four grabbing hands reached out, yanking Mulch into the shuttleport's interior. Mulch did not resist, allowing himself to be bundled along a dark corridor and into an interview room. He was plonked onto an uncomfortable chair, handcuffed, and left on his own to stew.

Mulch did not have time to stew. Every second he spent sitting here picking the insects from his beard hair was another second that Artemis and Holly had to spend running from trolls.

The dwarf rose from the chair and slapped his palms against the two-way mirror inset in the interview room wall.

"Chix Verbil," he shouted. "I know you're watching me. We need to talk. It's about Holly Short."

Mulch kept right on banging on the glass, until the cell door swung open and Chix Verbil entered the room. Chix was the LEP's fairy on the surface. Chix had been the first LEP casualty in the B'wa Kell goblin revolution a year previously, and had it not been for Holly Short, he would have been its first fatality. As it turned out, he got a medal from the Committee, a series of high-profile interviews on network television, and a cushy surface job in E1.

Chix entered suspiciously, his sprite wings folded behind him. The strap was off his Neutrino holster.

"Mulch Diggums, isn't it? Are you surrendering?"

Mulch snorted. "What do you think? I go to all the trouble of breaking out, just to surrender to a sprite. I think not, lamebrain."

Chix bristled, his wings fanning out behind him. "Hey, listen, dwarf. You're in no position to be making cracks. You're in my custody, in case you hadn't noticed. There are six security fairies surrounding this room."

"Security fairies. Don't make me laugh. They couldn't secure an apple in an orchard. I escaped from a sub-shuttle under a couple of miles of water. I can see at least six ways out of here without breaking a sweat."

Chix hovered nervously. "I'd like to see you try. I'd have two charges in your behind before you could unhinge that jaw of yours."

Mulch winced. Dwarfs don't like *behind* jokes.

"Okay, easy there, Mister Gung Ho. Let's talk about your wing. How's it healing up?"

"How do you know about that?"

"It was big news. You were all over the TV for a while, even on pirate satellite. I was watching your ugly face in Chicago not so long ago."

Chix preened. "Chicago?"

"That's right. You were saying, if I remember properly, how Holly Short saved your life, and how sprites never forget a debt, and whenever she needed you, you were there, whatever it took."

Chix coughed nervously. "A lot of that was scripted. And anyway, that was before . . ."

"Before one of the most decorated officers in the LEP decided to suddenly go crazy and shoot her own commander?"

“Yes. Before that.”

Mulch looked Verbil straight in his green face. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

Chix hovered even higher for a long moment, his wings whipping the air into currents. Then he settled back down to earth and sat in the room’s second chair. “No. I don’t believe it. Not for a second. Julius Root was like a father to Holly. To all of us.” He covered his face with his hands, afraid to hear the answer to his next question. “So, Diggums. Why are you here?”

Mulch leaned in close. “Is this being recorded?”

“Of course. Standard operating procedure.”

“Can you switch off the mike?”

“I suppose. Why should I?”

“Because I’m going to tell you something important for the People’s survival. But I’ll only tell you if the mikes are off.”

Chix’s wings began to flap once more. “This better be really good. I better really like this, dwarf.”

Mulch shrugged. “Oh, you’re not going to like it. But it is really good.”

Chix’s green fingers tapped a code into a keyboard on the table. “Okay, Diggums. We can talk freely.”

Mulch leaned forward across the desk. “The thing is, Opal Kobi is back.”

Chix did not respond verbally, but the color drained from his face. Instead of its usual robust emerald, the sprite’s complexion was now pasty lime green.

“Opal has escaped, somehow, and she has set this big revenge thing in motion. First General Scalene, then Commander Root, and now Holly and Artemis Fowl.”

“O . . . Opal?” stammered Chix, his wounded wing suddenly throbbing.

“She’s taking out anyone who had a hand in her imprisonment. Which, if memory serves, includes you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” squeaked Verbil, as though protesting his innocence to Mulch could help him.

Mulch sat back. “Hey, there’s no point telling me. I’m not out to get you. If I remember correctly, you were on all the chat shows spouting how you *personally* were the first member of the LEP to come into contact with the goblin smugglers.”

“Maybe she didn’t see that,” said Chix hopefully. “She was in a coma.”

“I’m sure someone taped it for her.”

Verbil thought about it, absently grooming his wings. “So what do you want from me?”

“I need you to get a message to Foaly. Tell him what I said about Opal.” Mulch covered his mouth with a hand to fox any lip-readers who might review the tape. “And I want the LEP shuttle. I know where it’s parked. I just need the starter chip and the ignition code.”

“What? Ridiculous. I’d go to jail.”

Mulch shook his head. “No, no. Without sound, all Police Plaza are going to see is another ingenious Mulch Diggums’s escape. I knock you out, steal your chip, and tunnel out through the pipe behind that water dispenser.”

Chix frowned. “Go back to the ‘knock me out’ part again.”

Mulch slammed one palm down on the table. “Listen, Verbil, Holly is in mortal danger right now. She may already be dead.”

“That’s what I heard,” interjected Chix.

“Well, she will definitely be dead if I don’t get down there right now.”

“Why don’t I just call this in?”

Mulch sighed dramatically. "Because, moron, by the time Police Plaza Retrieval team gets here, it will be too late. You know the rules: no LEP officer can act on the information of a convicted felon unless the information has been verified by another source."

"No one pays any attention to that rule, and calling me moron isn't helping."

Mulch rose to his feet. "You are a sprite, for heaven's sake. You are supposed to have this ancient code of chivalry. A female saved your life and now hers is in danger. You are honor bound, as a sprite, to do whatever it takes."

Chix held Mulch's gaze. "Is all of this true? Tell me, Mulch, because this will have repercussions. This isn't some little jewelry heist."

"It's true," said Mulch. "You have my word."

Chix almost laughed. "Oh, whoopee. Mulch Diggums's word. I can take that to the bank." He took several deep breaths and closed his eyes. "The chip is in my pocket. The code is written on the tab. Try not to break anything."

"Don't worry, I'm an excellent driver."

Chix winced in anticipation. "I don't mean the shuttle, stupid. I mean my face. The ladies like me the way I am."

Mulch drew back one gnarled fist. "Well, I'd hate to disappoint the ladies," he said, and knocked Chix Verbil from his chair.

Mulch expertly rifled through Chix's pockets. The sprite was not actually unconscious, but he was pretending.

A wise move. In seconds, Mulch had removed the starter chip and stuffed it into his beard. A clump of beard hair wrapped itself tightly around the chip, forming a waterproof cocoon. He also relieved Verbil of his Neutrino, though that was not part of the deal. Mulch crossed the room in two strides and jammed a chair under the door handle. That should buy me a couple of seconds, he thought. He wrapped an arm around the water dispenser while simultaneously unbuttoning his bum-flap. Speed was vital now because whoever had been watching the interview through the two-way mirror was already hammering on the door. Mulch saw a black burn dot appear on the door; they were burning their way in.

He ripped the dispenser from the wall, allowing several gallons of cooled water to flood the interview room.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," moaned Chix from the floor. "It takes forever to dry these wings."

"Shut up. You're supposed to be unconscious."

As soon as the water had drained from the supply pipe, Mulch dived into the pipe. He followed it to the first joint, then kicked it loose. Clumps of clay fell through, blocking the pipe. Mulch unhinged his jaw. He was back in the earth. No one could catch him now.

The shuttlebay was on the lower level, closest to the chute itself. Mulch angled himself downward, guided by his infallible dwarf internal compass. He had been in this terminal before, and the layout was burned into his memory, as was the layout of every building that he'd ever been in. Sixty seconds of chewing earth, stripping it of minerals, and ejecting waste at the other end brought Mulch face-to-face with an air duct. This particular duct led straight to the shuttlebay; the dwarf could even feel the vibration of the engines through his beard hair.

Generally he would burn through the duct's metal paneling with a few drops of dwarf rock polish, but prison guards tended to confiscate items like that, so instead Mulch blasted a panel with a concentrated burst from the stolen handgun. The panel melted like a sheet of ice in front of a bar heater. He gave the molten metal a minute to solidify and cool, then slithered into

the duct itself. Two left turns later, his face was pressed to the grille overlooking the shuttlebay itself. Red alarm lights were revolving over every door, and a harsh Klaxon made sure that everyone knew that there was some sort of emergency. The shuttlebay workers were gathered in front of the intranet screen, waiting for news.

Mulch dropped to the ground with more grace than his frame suggested was possible and crept across to the LEP shuttle. The shuttle was suspended nose-up over a vertical supply tunnel. Mulch crept aboard, opening the passenger door with Chix Verbil's chip. The controls were hugely complicated, but Mulch had a theory about vehicle controls: *Ignore everything except the wheel and the pedals, and you'll be fine*. So far in his career, he had stolen more than fifty types of transportation, and his theory hadn't let him down yet.

The dwarf thrust the starter chip into its socket, ignoring the computer's advice that he run a systems' check, and hit the release button. Eight tons of LEP shuttle dropped like a stone into the chute, spinning like an ice skater. The earth's gravity grabbed hold of it, reeling it in toward the earth's core.

Mulch's foot jabbed the thruster pedal just enough to halt the drop.

The radio on the dash started talking to him. "You in the shuttle. You'd better come back here right now. I'm not kidding! In twenty seconds I personally am going to press the self-destruct button."

Mulch spat a wad of dwarf spittle onto the speaker, muffling the irate voice. He gargled up another wad in his throat and deposited it on a circuit box below the radio. The circuits sparked and fizzled. So much for the self-destruct.

The controls were a bit heavier than Mulch was used to. Nevertheless, he managed to tame the machine after a few scrapes along the chute wall. If the LEP ever recovered the craft, it would need a fresh coat of paint, and perhaps a new starboard fender.

A bolt of sizzling laser energy flashed past the porthole.

That was his warning shot. One across the bows before they let the computer do the aiming. Time to be gone. Mulch kicked off his boots, wrapped his double-jointed toes around the pedals, and sped down the chute toward the rendezvous point.

Butler parked the Bentley fifteen miles northeast of Tara, near a cluster of rocks shaped like a clenched fist. The index finger rock was hollow, just as Mulch had told him it would be. However, the dwarf had neglected to mention that the opening would be cluttered with potato crisp bags and chewing-gum patties left over from a thousand teenagers' picnics. Butler picked his way through the rubbish to discover two boys huddled at the rear, smoking secret cigarettes. A Labrador pup was asleep at their feet. Obviously these two had volunteered to walk the dog so they could sneak some cigarettes. Butler did not like smoking.

The boys looked up at the enormous figure looming above them, their jaded teenage expressions freezing on their faces.

Butler pointed at the cigarettes. "Those things will seriously damage your health," he growled. "And if they don't, I might."

The teenagers stubbed out their cigarettes and scurried from the cave, which was exactly what Butler wanted them to do. He pushed aside a wizened scrub cluster at the rear of the cave to discover a mud wall.

"Punch right through the mud," Mulch had told him. "Generally I eat through and patch it up afterward, but you might not want to do that."

Butler jabbed four rigid fingers at the center of the mud wall, where cracks were beginning to spread, and sure enough the wall was only inches thick and crumbled easily under

the pressure. The bodyguard pulled away chunks until there was sufficient space to squeeze through to the tunnel beyond.

To say there was *sufficient* space is perhaps a slight exaggeration; *barely enough* is probably more accurate. Butler's bulky frame was compressed on all sides by uneven walls of black clay. Occasionally a jagged rock poked through, tearing a gash in his designer suit. That was two suits ruined in as many days. One in Munich, and now the second belowground in Ireland. Still, suits were the least of his worries. If Mulch was right, then Artemis was running around the Lower Elements right now with a group of bloodthirsty trolls on his trail. Butler had fought a troll once, and the battle had very nearly killed him. He couldn't even imagine fighting an entire group.

Butler dug his fingers into the earth, pulling himself forward through the tunnel. This particular tunnel, Mulch had informed him, was one of many illicit back doors into the Lower Elements chute system chewed out by fugitive dwarfs over the centuries. Mulch himself had excavated this one almost three hundred years ago, when he had needed to sneak back to Haven for his cousin's birthday bash. Butler tried not to think about the dwarf's recycling process as he went.

After several feet the tunnel widened into a bulb-shaped chamber. The walls glowed a gentle green. Mulch had explained that too. The walls were coated with dwarf spittle, which hardened on prolonged contact with air, and also glowed. Amazing. Drinking pores, living hairs, and now luminous saliva. What next? Explosive phlegm? He wouldn't be a bit surprised. Who knew what secrets the dwarfs were hiding up their sleeves? Or in other places?

Butler kicked aside a pile of rabbit bones, the remains of previous dwarf snacks, and sat down to wait.

He checked the luminous face of his Omega wristwatch. He had dropped Mulch at Tara almost thirty minutes ago; the little man should be here by now. The bodyguard would have paced the chamber, but there was barely enough space for him to stand up, never mind pace. The bodyguard crossed his legs, settling down for a power nap. He hadn't slept since the missile attack in Germany, and he wasn't as young as he used to be. His heart rate and breathing slowed until eventually his chest barely moved at all.

Eight minutes later, the small chamber began to shake violently. Chunks of brittle spittle cracked from the wall, shattering on the floor. The ground beneath his feet glowed red, and a stream of insects and worms flowed away from the hot spot. Butler stood to one side, calmly brushing himself down. Moments later a cylindrical section of earth dropped cleanly out of the floor, leaving a steaming hole.

Mulch's voice drifted through the hole, borne on the waves of the stolen shuttle's amplification system.

"Let's go, Mud Man. Move yourself. We have people to save, and the LEP are on my tail."

On Mulch Diggums's tail, thought Butler, shuddering. Not a nice place to be.

Nevertheless, the bodyguard lowered himself into the hole and through the open roof hatch of the hovering LEP shuttle. Police shuttles were cramped, even for fairies, but Butler could not even sit up straight in a chair, even if there had been a chair wide enough for him. He had to content himself with kneeling behind the command seat.

"All set?" he inquired.

Mulch picked a beetle from Butler's shoulder. He shoved it into his beard, where the unfortunate insect was immediately cocooned by hair.

“For later,” he explained. “Unless you want it?”

Butler smiled, but it was an effort. “Thanks. I already ate.”

“Oh, really? Well whatever you ate, hold on to it, because we are in a hurry, so I may have to break a few speed limits.”

The dwarf cracked every joint in his fingers and toes, then sent the craft into a steep spiraling dive. Butler slid to the rear of the craft, and had to hook three seat belts together to prevent further jostling.

“Is this really necessary?” he grunted through rippling cheeks.

“Look behind you,” replied Mulch.

Butler struggled to his knees, directing his gaze through the rear window. They were being pursued by a trio of what looked like fireflies, but what were actually smaller shuttles. The crafts matched their every spiral and jink exactly. One fired a small sparking torpedo that sent a shock wave sparking through the hull. Butler felt the pores in his shaven head tingle.

“LEP uni-pods,” explained Mulch. “They just took out our communications mast, in case we have accomplices in the chutes somewhere. Those pods have got a lock on our navigation’s system. Their own computers will follow us forever, unless.”

“Unless what?”

“Unless we can outrun them. Get out of their range.”

Butler tightened the belts across his torso. “And can we?”

Mulch flexed his fingers and toes. “Let’s find out,” he said, flicking the throttle wide.

The Eleven Wonders, Temple of Artemis Exhibit, The Lower Elements

Holly and Artemis huddled together on the small island of rotting carcasses, waiting for the trolls to finish their bridge. The creatures were frantic now, hurling rock after rock into the shallow water. Some even braved placing a toe in the currents, but quickly drew them out again with horrified howls.

Holly wiped water from her eyes. “Okay,” she said. “I have a plan. I stay here and fight them. You go back in the river.”

Artemis shook his head curtly. “I appreciate it. But no. It would be suicide for both of us. The trolls would devour you in a second, then simply wait for the current to sweep me right back here. There must be another way.”

Holly threw a troll skull at the nearest creature. The brute caught it deftly in his talons, crushing it to shards. “I’m listening, Artemis.”

Artemis rubbed a knuckle against his forehead, willing the memory block to dissolve. “If I could remember. Then maybe ...”

“Don’t you remember anything?”

“Images. Something. Nothing coherent. Just nightmare pictures. This could all be a hallucination. That is the most likely explanation. Perhaps I should just relax and wait to wake up.”

“Think of it as a challenge. If this were a role-playing game, how would the character escape?”

“If this were a war game, I would need to know the other side’s weaknesses. Water is one ...”

“And light,” blurted Holly. “Trolls hate light. It burns their retinas.”

The creatures were venturing onto their makeshift bridge now, testing each step carefully. The stink of their unwashed fur and fetid breath drifted across to the little island.

“Light,” repeated Artemis. “That’s why they like it here. Hardly any light.”

“Yes. The Glo-Strips are on emergency power, and the fake sun is on minimum.”

Artemis glanced upward. Holographic clouds scudded across an imitation sky, and right in the center, poised dramatically above the temple’s roof, was a crystal sun, with barely a flicker of power in its belly.

An idea blossomed in his mind. “There is scaffolding on the near corner of the temple. If we could climb up and get to the sun, could you use the power cells from our cuffs to light up the sun?”

Holly frowned. “Yes, I suppose. But how do we get past the trolls?”

Artemis picked up the waterproof pod that had been playing Opal’s video message.

“We distract them with a little television.”

Holly fiddled with the pod’s on-screen controls until she found brightness. She flicked the setting to maximum. Opal’s image was whited out by a block of glaring light.

“Hurry,” advised Artemis, tugging Holly’s sleeve. The first troll was halfway across the bridge, followed by the rest of the precariously balanced bunch. The world’s shaggiest conga line.

Holly wrapped her arms around the tele-pod. “This is probably not going to work,” she said.

Artemis moved behind her. “I know, but there is no other option.”

“Okay. But if we don’t make it, I’m sorry you don’t remember. It’s good to be with a friend at a time like this.”

Artemis squeezed her shoulder. “If we make it through this, we will be friends. Bonded by trauma.”

Their little island was shaking now. Skulls were dislodged from their perches, rolling into the water. The trolls were almost upon them, picking their way across the precarious walkway, squealing at every drop of water that landed on their fur. Any trolls still on the shoreline were hammering the earth with their knuckles, long ropes of drool swinging from their jaws.

Holly waited until the last moment for maximum effect. The tele-pod’s screen was pressed into the rubbish heap, so the approaching animals would not have a clue as to what was coming.

“Holly?” said Artemis urgently.

“Wait,” whispered Holly. “Just a few seconds more.”

The first troll in the line reached their island. This was obviously the pack leader. He reared up to a height of almost ten feet, shaking his shaggy head and howling at the artificial sky. Then he appeared to notice that Artemis and Holly were not in fact female trolls, and a savage rage took hold of his tiny brain. Dribbles of venom dropped from his tusks, and he inverted his talons for an upward slash. Trolls’ preferred kill strike was under the ribs. This popped the heart quickly and did not give the meat time to toughen.

More trolls crowded onto the tiny island, eager for a share in the kill or a shot at a new mate. Holly chose that moment to act. She swung the tele-pod upward, pointing the buzzing screen directly at the nearest troll. The creature reared back, clawing at the hated light as though it were a solid enemy. The light blasted the troll’s retinas, sending him staggering backward into his companions. A group of the animals tumbled into the river. Panic spread back along the line like a virus. The creatures reacted to water as though it were acid dappling their fur and backpedaled furiously toward the shore. This was no orderly retreat. Anything in the way got scythed or bitten. Gouts of venom and blood flew through the air, and the water bubbled as though it were boiling. The troll’s howls of bloodlust changed to keening screams of pain and

terror.

This can't be real, thought a stunned Artemis Fowl. I must be hallucinating. Perhaps I am in a coma, following the fall from the hotel window. And because his brain provided this possible explanation, his memories stayed under lock and key.

"Grab my belt," ordered Holly, advancing across the makeshift bridge. Artemis obeyed instantly. This was not the time to argue about leadership. In any case, if there were the slightest possibility that this was actually happening, then Captain Short was better qualified to handle these creatures.

Holly wielded the tele-pod like a portable laser cannon, advancing step-by-step across the makeshift bridge. Artemis tried to concentrate on keeping his balance on the treacherous ground. They stepped from rock to rock, wobbling like novice tightrope walkers. Holly swung the tele-pod in smooth arcs, blasting trolls from every angle.

Too many, thought Artemis. There are too many. We can never make it.

But there was no future in giving up. So they kept going, taking two steps forward and one step back.

A crafty bull ducked low, avoiding Holly's first sweep. He reached out one talon, cracking the pod's waterproof casing. Holly stumbled backward, knocking over Artemis. The pair keeled over into the river, landing with a solid thump in the shallow water.

Artemis felt the air shoot from his lungs, and took an instinctive breath. Unfortunately he took in water rather than air. Holly kept her elbows locked, so the ruptured casing stayed out of the river. Some splash drops crept into the crack, and sparks began to play across the screen.

Holly struggled to her feet, simultaneously aiming the screen at the bull troll. Artemis came up behind her, coughing water from his lungs.

"The screen's damaged," panted Holly. "I don't know how much time we have."

Artemis wiped strands of hair from his eyes. "Go," he spluttered. "Go."

They trudged through the water, stepping around thrashing trolls. Holly chose a clear spot on the bank to climb ashore. It was a relief to be on dry land again, but at least the water had been on their side, as it were; now they were truly in troll territory.

The remaining animals encircled them at a safe distance. Whenever one came too close, Holly swung the tele-pod in its direction, and the creature skipped back as though stung.

Artemis fought the cold and the fatigue and the shock in his system. His ankle was scalded where the troll had snagged him.

"We need to go straight for the temple," he said through chattering teeth. "Up the scaffolding."

"Okay. Hold on."

Holly took several deep breaths, building up her strength. Her arms were sore from holding the tele-pod, but she would not let the fatigue show in her face, or the fear. She looked those trolls straight in their red eyes and let them know they were dealing with a formidable enemy.

"Ready?"

"Ready," replied Artemis, although he was no such thing.

Holly took one final breath, then charged. The trolls were not expecting this tactic. After all, what kind of creature would attack a troll? They broke ranks in the face of the arc of white light, and their disconcertion lasted just long enough for Artemis and Holly to charge through the hole in the line.

They hurried up the incline toward the temple. Holly made no attempt to avoid the trolls,

running straight at them. When they lashed out in temporary blindness, they only caused more confusion among themselves. A dozen vicious squabbles erupted in Holly and Artemis's wake, as the animals accidentally sliced each other with razor-sharp talons. Some of the cannier trolls used the opportunity to settle old scores. The squabbles chain-reacted across the plain until the entire area was a mass of writhing animals and dust.

Artemis grunted and puffed his way up the ravine, his fingers wrapped around Holly's belt. Captain Short's breathing had settled into a steady rhythm of quick bursts.

I am not physically fit, thought Artemis. And it may cost me dearly. I need to exercise more than my brain in the future. If I have a future.

The temple loomed above them, a scale model, but still over fifty feet high. Dozens of identical columns rose into the holographic clouds, supporting a triangular roof decorated with intricate plaster moldings. The columns' lower regions were scarred by a thousand claw marks where younger trolls had scampered out of harm's way. Artemis and Holly clambered up the twenty or so steps to the columns themselves.

Fortunately there were no trolls on the scaffolding. All of the animals were busy trying to kill each other, or avoid being killed, but it was only a matter of seconds before they remembered that there were intruders in their midst. Fresh meat. Not many of the trolls had tasted elf meat, but those who had were eager to try it again. Only one of the present gathering had tasted human meat, and the memory of its sweetness still haunted his dull brain at night.

It was this particular troll who hauled himself from the river, carrying twenty extra pound's of moisture weight. He casually cuffed a cub who had come too close, and sniffed the air. There was a new scent here. A scent he could remember from his short time under the moon. The scent of man. The mere recognition of the smell brought saliva flowing from the glands in his throat. He set off at a pitched run toward the temple. Soon there was a rough group of flesh-hungry beasts hurtling toward the scaffolding.

"We're back on the menu," noted Holly when she reached the scaffolding.

Artemis unhooked his fingers from the LEP captain's belt. He would have answered, but his lungs demanded oxygen. He whooped in gulps of air, resting his knuckles on his knees.

Holly took his elbow. "No time for that, Artemis. You have to climb."

"After you," Artemis managed to gasp. He knew his father would never allow a lady to remain in distress while he himself fled.

"No time for discussion," said Holly, steering Artemis by the elbow. "Climb for the sun. I'll buy us a few seconds with the tele-pod. Go."

Artemis looked into Holly's eyes to say thank you. They were round and hazel and . . . familiar? Memories fought to be free of their bonds, pounding against cell walls.

"Holly?" he said.

Holly spun him around to the bars, and the moment was gone. "Up. You're wasting time."

Artemis marshaled his exhausted limbs, trying to coordinate his movements. Step, grab, pull. It should be easy enough. He'd climbed ladders before. One ladder at least. Surely.

The scaffold bars were coated with gripped rubber, especially for climbers, and were spaced precisely sixteen inches apart, the comfortable reach distance of the average fairy. Also, coincidentally, the comfortable reach of a fourteen-year-old human. Artemis started to climb, feeling the strain in his arms before he had risen six steps. It was too early to be tired. There was too far to go.

"Come on, Captain," he gasped over his shoulder. "Climb."

“Not just yet,” said Holly. She had her back to the scaffold and was trying to find some pattern in the approaching bunches of trolls.

There had been an in-service course on troll attacks in Police Plaza. But that had been in the event of a one-on-one situation. To Holly’s eternal embarrassment, the lecturer had used video footage of her own tangle with a troll in Italy over two years ago. “This,” the lecturer had said, freezing Holly’s image in the big screen, and rapping it with a telescopic pointer, “is a classic example of how not to do it.”

This was a completely different scenario. They had never received instruction on what to do when attacked by an entire pack of trolls in their own habitat. No one, the instructors reasoned, would be that stupid.

There were two converging groups coming straight toward her. One from the river, led by a veritable monster with anesthetic venom dripping from both tusks. Holly knew that if one drop of that venom got under her skin, she would fall into a happy stupor. And even if she escaped the troll’s claws, the slow poison would eventually paralyze her.

The second group approached from the western ridge, composed mainly of latecomers and cubs. There were a few females in the center of the temple itself, but they were taking advantage of the distraction to pick meat from abandoned carcasses.

Holly flicked the tele-pod’s setting to low. She would have to time this exactly right for maximum effect. This was the last chance she would get, because once she started to climb, then she could no longer aim.

The trolls sped up the temple steps, jostling for first place. The two groups were approaching at right angles, both headed directly toward Holly. The leaders launched themselves from a distance, determined to get the first bite of the intruder. Their lips peeled back to reveal rows of carnivorous teeth, and their eyes focused solely on the target. And that was when Holly acted. She flicked the brightness setting to high and scorched the retinas of the two beasts while they were still in the air. With piercing howls, they swatted the hated light and crashed to the ground in a melee of arms, claws, tusks, and teeth. Each troll assumed he was being attacked by a rival group, and in seconds the scaffold’s base was a chaos of primal violence.

Holly took full advantage of the confusion, skipping lithely up the first three rungs of the metal structure. She clipped the tele-pod onto her belt so that it pointed downward like a rear gun. Not much protection, but better than nothing.

In moments, she had caught up with Artemis. The human boy’s breath was ragged and his progress was slow. A slow stream of blood dripped from the wound on his ankle. Holly could easily have passed him, but instead she hooked an arm through the bars of the ladder and checked on the troll situation. Just as well. One relatively little guy was scaling the bars with the agility of a mountain gorilla. His immature tusks barely jutted beyond his lips, but those tusks were sharp and venom gathered in beads along the tips. Holly turned the tele-screen on him, and he released his grip to shield his scorched eyes. An elf would have been smart enough to hang on with one hand and use the other forearm to shield the eyes, but trolls are not much farther up the IQ scale than stinkworms, and act almost completely on instinct.

The little troll tumbled back to earth, landing on the shaggy, writhing carpet below. He was instantly dragged into the brawl. Holly returned to the climb, feeling the tele-pod knock against her back. Artemis’s progress was painfully slow, and in less than a minute, she was tight at his shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

Artemis nodded, tight lipped. But his eyes were wide, on the verge of panic. Holly had

seen that look before, on the faces of battle-stressed LEP officers. She needed to get the Mud Boy to safety before he lost his reason.

“Come on now, Artemis. Just a few more steps. We’re going to make it.”

Artemis closed his eyes for five seconds, breathing deeply through his nose. When he opened them again, they shone with a new resolve.

“Very well, Captain. I’m ready.”

Artemis reached above him for the next bar, hauling himself sixteen inches closer to salvation. Holly followed, urging him on like a drill sergeant.

It took a further minute to reach the roof itself. By this time the trolls had remembered what they were chasing, and had begun to scale the scaffolding. Holly dragged Artemis onto the slanted roof and they scampered on all fours toward its highest point. The plaster was white and unmarked. In the low light it seemed as though they were walking across a field of snow.

Artemis paused. The sight had awoken a vague memory. “Snow,” he said uncertainly. “I remember something . . .”

Holly caught his shoulder, dragging him forward. “Yes, Artemis. The Arctic, remember? We’ll discuss it at great length later, when there are no trolls trying to eat us.”

Artemis snapped back to the present. “Very well. Good tactic.”

The temple roof sloped upward at a forty-degree angle, toward the crystal orb that was the fake sun. The pair crawled as quickly as Artemis’s exhausted limbs would allow. A ragged trail of blood marked their path across the white plaster. The scaffold shook and banged against the roof as the trolls climbed ever closer.

Holly straddled the roof’s apex and reached up to the crystal sun. The surface was smooth beneath her fingers.

“D’Arvit!” she swore. “I can’t find the power port. There should be an external socket.”

Artemis crawled around the other side. He was not particularly afraid of heights, but even so, he tried not to look down. One did not have to suffer from vertigo to be worried by a fifty-foot drop and a pack of ravenous trolls. He stretched upward, probing the globe with the fingers of one hand. His index finger found a small indent.

“I’ve got something,” he announced.

Holly scooted around to his side, examining the hole.

“Good,” she said. “An external power port. Power cells have uniform connection points, so the cuffs’ cells should clip right on.”

She fumbled the cuffs from her pocket and popped the cell covers. The cells themselves were about the size of credit cards, and glowed bright blue along their length.

Holly stood up on the razor-edge rooftop, balancing nimbly on her toes. The trolls were swarming over the lip of the roof now. Advancing like the hounds of hell.

The white roof plaster was blanketed by the black, brown, and ginger of troll fur. Their howls and stink preceded them as they closed in on Holly and Artemis.

Holly waited until they were all over the lip, then slid the power cells into the globe’s socket. The globe buzzed, vibrated to life, then flashed once. A blinding wall of light. For a moment the entire exhibit glowed brilliant white, then the globe faded again with a high-pitched whine.

The trolls rolled like balls on a tilted pool table. Some tumbled over the edge of the roof but most collected on the lip, where they lay whining and scratching their faces.

Artemis closed his eyes to accelerate the return of his night vision. “I had hoped the cell would power the sun for longer. It seems like a lot of effort for such a brief reprieve.”

Holly pulled out the dead cells and tossed them aside. "I suppose a globe like this needs a lot of juice."

Artemis blinked, then sat comfortably on the roof, clasping his knees.

"Still. We have some time. It can take nocturnal creatures up to fifteen minutes to recover their orientation following exposure to bright light."

Holly sat beside him. "Fascinating. You're very calm all of a sudden."

"I have no choice," said Artemis simply. "I have analyzed the situation and concluded that there is no way for us to escape. We are on top of a ridiculous model of the Temple of Artemis, surrounded by temporarily blinded trolls. As soon as they recover, they will lope up here and devour us.

We have perhaps a quarter of an hour to live, and I have no intention of spending it in hysterics for Opal Koboi's amusement."

Holly looked up, searching the hemisphere for cameras. At least a dozen telltale red lights winked from the darkness. Opal would be able to watch her revenge from every angle.

Artemis was right. Opal would be tickled pink if they fell to pieces for the cameras. She would probably replay the video to cheer herself up when being princess of the world got to be too stressful.

Holly drew back her arm and sent the spent power cells skidding across the roof. It seemed then that this was it. She felt more frustrated than scared. Julius's final order had been to save Artemis, and she hadn't managed to accomplish even that.

"I'm sorry you don't remember Julius," she said. "You two argued a lot, but he admired you behind it all. It was Butler he really liked, though. Those two were on the same wavelength. Two old soldiers."

Below them, the trolls were gathering themselves. Blinking away the stars in their eyes.

Artemis slapped some of the dust from his trousers. "I do remember, Holly. I remember it all. Especially you. It's a real comfort to have you here."

Holly was surprised. Shocked, even. More by Artemis's tone than what he had actually said, though that was surprising too. She had never heard Artemis sound so warm, so sincere. Usually, emotional displays were difficult for the boy, and he stumbled through them awkwardly. This wasn't like him at all.

"That's very nice, Artemis," she said after a moment's consideration. "But you don't have to pretend for me."

Artemis was puzzled. "How did you know? I thought I portrayed the emotions perfectly."

Holly looked down at the massing trolls. They were advancing warily up the slope, heads down in case of a second flash.

"Nobody's that perfect. That's how I knew."

The trolls were hurrying now, swinging their hairy forearms forward to increase momentum. As their confidence returned, so did their voices. Their howls to the roof bounced back off the metal structure. Artemis drew his knees closer to his chin. The end. All over. Inconceivable that he should die this way, when there was so much to be done.

The howling made it hard to concentrate. The smell didn't help either.

Holly gripped his shoulder. "Close your eyes, Artemis. You won't feel a thing."

But Artemis did not close his eyes. Instead he cast his gaze upward. Aboveground, where his parents were waiting to hear from him. Parents who never had the chance to be truly proud of him.

He opened his mouth to whisper a good-bye, but what he saw over his head choked the

words in his throat.

“That proves it,” he said. “This must be a hallucination.”

Holly looked upward. A section of the hemisphere’s panel had been removed, and a rope was being lowered toward the temple roof. Swinging from the rope was what appeared to be a naked and extremely hairy rear end.

“I don’t believe it!” Holly exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “You took your sweet time getting here!”

She seemed to be conversing with a posterior. And then, even more amazingly, the posterior appeared to answer.

“I love you too, Holly. Now, close anything that’s open, because I’m about to overload these troll’s senses.”

For a moment Holly’s face was blank, then realization widened her eyes and sucked the blood from her cheeks. She grabbed Artemis by the shoulders.

“Lie flat with your hands over your ears. Shut your eyes and mouth. And whatever you do, don’t breathe in.”

Artemis lay on the roof. “Tell me there’s a creature on the other end of that posterior.”

“There is,” confirmed Holly. “But it’s the posterior we have to worry about.”

The trolls were seconds away by this point. Close enough for Holly and Artemis to see the red in their eyes and the years of dirt caked in every dreadlock.

Overhead, Mulch Diggums (for of course it was he) released a gentle squib of wind from his backside. Just enough to propel him in a gentle circle on the end of his rope. The circular motion was necessary to ensure an even spread of the gas he intended to release. Once he had completed three revolutions, he bore down internally and let fly with every bubble of gas in his bloated stomach.

Because trolls are by nature tunnel creatures, they are guided as much by their sense of smell as their night vision. A blinded troll can often survive for years, navigating his way to food and water supplies by smell alone.

Mulch’s sudden gaseous recyclings sent a million conflicting scent messages to each troll’s brain. The smell was bad enough, and the wind was sufficient to blow back the trolls’ dreadlocks, but the combination of scents inside the dwarf gas, including clay, vegetation, insect life, and everything else Mulch had eaten over the past few days, was enough to short out the trolls’ entire nervous systems. They collapsed to their knees, clasping their poor aching heads in taloned hands. One was so close to Artemis and Holly that its shaggy forearm rested across the LEP captain’s back.

Holly wriggled out from under the limb. “Let’s go,” she said, pulling Artemis to his feet. “The gas won’t put the trolls out for any longer than the light.”

Overhead, Mulch’s revolutions were slowing.

“I thank you,” he said with a theatrical bow, which is not easy on a rope. The dwarf scampered up the rope, gripping with fingers and toes, then lowered it to Artemis and Holly.

“Jump on,” he said. “Quickly.”

Artemis tested the rope skeptically. “Surely that strange creature is too small to haul both of us all the way up there.”

Holly placed her foot in a loop at the rope’s end. “True, but he’s not alone.”

Artemis squinted at the hemisphere’s missing panel. Another figure had appeared in the gap. The figure’s features were in deep shadow, but the silhouette was unmistakable.

“Butler!” he said through his smile. “You’re here.”

And suddenly, in spite of everything, Artemis felt completely safe.

“Hurry up, Artemis,” called his bodyguard. “We don’t have a second to waste.”

Artemis stepped onto the rope beside Holly, and Butler quickly pulled them both out of danger.

“Well?” said Holly, her face inches from his own. “We survived. Does that mean we’re friends now? Bonded by trauma.”

Artemis frowned. Friends? Did he have room in his life for a friend? Then again, did he have a choice in the matter?

“Yes,” he replied. “I’ve had little experience in this area, so I may have to read up on it.”

Holly rolled her eyes. “Friendship is not a science, Mud Boy. Forget about your massive brain for one minute. Just do what you feel is right.”

Artemis couldn’t believe what he was about to say. Perhaps the thrill of survival was affecting his judgment. “I feel that I shouldn’t be paid to help a friend. Keep your fairy gold. Opal Koboi has to be stopped.”

Holly smiled with genuine warmth for the first time since the commander’s death, but there was a hint of steel in there too.

“With the four of us on her tail, she doesn’t stand a chance.”

CHAPTER 8

SOME INTELLIGENT CONVERSATION

Mulch had left the stolen LEP shuttle at the theme park gate. It had been a simple matter for Butler to disable the park’s cameras and remove a half-rotted section from the hemisphere’s roof in order to effect the rescue.

When they got back to the shuttle, Holly powered up the engines and ran a systems check.

“What on earth were you doing, Mulch?” she asked, amazed by the readings the computer was displaying. “The computer says you came all the way down here in first gear.”

“There are gears?” said the dwarf. “I thought this crate was automatic.”

“Some jockeys prefer gears. Old-fashioned, I know, but more control around the bends. And another thing, you didn’t have to do that gas thing on the rope. There are plenty of stun grenades in the weapons locker.”

“This thing has a locker too? Gears and lockers. Well, I never.”

Butler was giving Artemis a field physical.

“You seem all right,” he said, placing a massive palm over Artemis’s chest. “Holly fixed up your ribs, I see.”

Artemis was in a bit of a daze. Now that he was out of immediate danger, the day’s events were catching up to him. How many times could one person cheat death in twenty-four hours? Surely his odds were getting shorter.

“Tell me, Butler,” he whispered so the others wouldn’t hear, “is it all true? Or is it a hallucination?” Even as the words left his lips, Artemis realized that it was an impossible question. If this was all a hallucination, then his bodyguard was a dream, too.

“I turned down gold, Butler,” continued Artemis, still unable to accept his own grand gesture. “Me. I turned down gold.”

Butler smiled, much more the smile of a friend than a bodyguard. “That doesn’t surprise me one bit. You were becoming quite charitable before the mind wipe.”

Artemis frowned. "Of course you would say that, if you were part of the hallucination."

Mulch was eavesdropping on the conversation and couldn't resist a comment. "Didn't you smell what I shot those trolls with? You think you could hallucinate that, Mud Boy?"

Holly started the engines. "Hold on back there," she called over her shoulder. "It's time to go. The sensors picked up some shuttles sweeping local chutes. The authorities are looking for us. I need to get us somewhere off the charts."

Holly teased the throttle and lifted them smoothly from the ground. If the shuttle had not had portholes, the passengers might not have noticed the takeoff.

Butler elbowed Mulch. "Did you see that? That's a takeoff. I hope you learned something."

The dwarf was highly offended. "What do I have to do to get a bit of respect around here? You are all alive because of me, and all I get is abuse."

Butler laughed. "Okay, little friend. I apologize. We owe you our lives, and I, for one, will never forget it."

Artemis followed this interaction curiously. "I would deduce that you remember everything, Butler. If, for a moment, I accept this situation as reality, then your memory must have been stimulated. Did I, perhaps, leave something behind?"

Butler pulled the laser disk from his pocket. "Oh yes, Artemis. There was a message on this disk for me. You left yourself a message, too."

Artemis took the disk. "At last," he said. "Some intelligent conversation."

* * *

Artemis found a small bathroom at the rear of the shuttle. The in-door toilet itself was only to be used in an emergency, and the seat was made from a spongy material which Mulch had assured him would break down any waste as it passed through. Artemis decided he would test the filter at another time, and sat on a small ledge by the porthole.

There was a plasma screen on the wall, presumably for in-restroom entertainment. All he had to do was slip the computer disk into the drive below the screen, and his fairy memories would be returned to him. A whole new world. An old one.

Artemis spun the disk between his thumb and forefinger. Psychologically speaking, if he loaded this disk it meant that some part of him accepted the truth of all this. Putting the disk in the slot could plunge him deeper into some kind of psychotic episode. Not putting it in could condemn the world to a war between species. The fairy and human worlds would collide.

What would father do? Artemis asked himself.

He loaded the disk.

Two files appeared on the desktop, marked with animated 3-D GIFs, something the fairy system had obviously added on. Both were tagged with the file names in English and the fairy language. Artemis selected his own file by touching the plasma screen's transparent covering. The file glowed orange, then expanded to fill the screen. Artemis saw himself in Fowl Manor, sitting at his desk in the study.

"Greetings," said the screen Artemis. "How nice for you to see me. Doubtless, this will be the first intelligent conversation you have had for some time."

The real Artemis smiled. "Correct," he replied.

"I paused for a second there," continued the screen Artemis. "To give you a chance to respond, thus qualifying this as a conversation. There will be no more pausing, as time is limited. Captain Holly Short is downstairs being distracted by Juliet, but doubtless she will check on me

soon. We depart for Chicago presently to deal with Mr. Jon Spiro, who has stolen something from me. The price of fairy assistance in this matter is a mind wipe. All memories of the People will be erased forever, unless I leave a message for my future self, thus prompting recall. This is that message. The following video footage contains specific details of my involvement with the Fairy People. I hope this information will get those brain cell pathways sparking again.”

Artemis rubbed his forehead. The vague mysterious flashes persisted. It seemed as though his brain was ready to rebuild those pathways. All he needed was the right stimulus.

“In conclusion,” said the screen Artemis. “I would like to wish you, myself, the best of luck. And welcome back.”

The next hour passed in a blur. Images flashed from the screen, adhering to empty spaces in Artemis’s brain. Each memory felt right the instant Artemis processed it.

Of course, he thought. This explains everything. I had the mirrored contact lenses made so I could lie to the fairies and hide the existence of this journal. I fixed Mulch Diggums’s search warrant so that he could return the disk to me. Butler looks older because he is older; the fairy healing in London saved his life, but cost him fifteen years.

The memories were not all proud ones. I kidnapped Captain Short. I imprisoned Holly. How could I have done that?

He could not deny it any longer. This was all true. Everything that his eyes had seen was real. The fairies existed and his life had been intertwined with theirs for more than two years. A million images sprouted in his consciousness, rebuilding electric bridges in his brain. They strobed behind his eyes in a confusing display of color and wonder. A lesser mind than Artemis’s could have been utterly exhausted, but the Irish boy was exhilarated.

I know it all now, he thought. I beat Koboï before, and I will do it again. This determination was fueled by sadness. Commander Root is gone. Koboï took him from his People.

Artemis had known this earlier, but now it meant something.

There was one other thought, more persistent than the rest. It crashed into his mind like a tsunami.

I have friends? thought Artemis Fowl the Second. I have friends.

Artemis emerged from the bathroom a different person. Physically, he was still battered, bruised, and exhausted, but emotionally he felt prepared for everything that lay ahead. If a body language analyst had studied him at that moment, they would have observed his relaxed shoulders and open palms, and would have concluded that this was, psychologically speaking, a more welcoming and trustworthy individual than the one who had entered the bathroom an hour since.

The shuttle was parked in a secondary chute off the beaten track, and the occupants were at the mess table. A selection of LEP field ration packs had been torn open and devoured. The biggest pile of foil packs was stacked in front of Mulch Diggums.

Mulch glanced at Artemis and noticed the change immediately. “About time you got your head in order,” grunted Mulch, struggling from his chair. “I need to get into that bathroom urgently.”

“Nice to see you too, Mulch,” said Artemis, stepping aside to allow the dwarf past.

Holly froze, a sachet of juice halfway to her mouth. “You remember him?”

Artemis smiled. “Of course, Holly. We have known each other for more than two years.”

Holly jumped from her chair and clasped Artemis by the shoulders. “Artemis. It’s great to see you. The real you. The gods know we need Artemis Fowl right now.”

“Well, he’s here and ready for duty, Captain.”

“Do you remember everything?”

“Yes. I do. And first of all, let me apologize for that *consultant* business. That was very rude. Please forgive me.”

“But what made you remember?” asked the elf. “Don’t tell me a visit to the bathroom jogged your memory.”

“Not exactly.” Artemis held up the computer disk. “I gave this to Mulch. It is my video diary. He was supposed to return it to me upon his release from prison.”

Holly shook her head. “That’s not possible. Mulch was searched by experts. The only thing you gave him was the gold medallion.”

Artemis angled the disk so it caught the light.

“Of course,” groaned Holly, slapping her forehead. “You passed off that disk as the gold medallion. Very clever.”

Artemis shrugged. “Genius, actually. It seems merely clever in hindsight, but the original idea was pure genius.”

Holly cocked her head. “Genius. Of course. Believe it or not I actually missed that smug grin.”

Artemis took a breath. “I am so sorry about Julius. I know our relationship was a rocky one, but I had nothing but respect and admiration for the commander.”

Holly wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. She said nothing, just nodded. If Artemis needed another reason to go after Opal Koboi, the sight of the elfin captain so disturbed was it.

Butler ate the contents of a field ration pack in one mouthful. “Now that we’re all reacquainted, we should try to track Opal Koboi down. It’s a big world.”

Artemis waved his fingers dismissively. “No need. I know exactly where our would-be murderer is. Like all megalomaniacs, she has a tendency to show off.” He crossed to a plastic computer keyboard on the wall and called up a map of Europe.

“I see your Gnommish has come back to you,” sniffed Holly.

“Of course,” said Artemis, enlarging part of the map. “Opal revealed a little bit more of her plan than she knew. She let two words slip, though one would have been sufficient. She said that her human name was to be Belinda Zito. Now, if you wished to lead the humans to the Fairy People, who better to have adopt you than the renowned billionaire environmentalist Giovanni Zito?”

Holly crossed the shuttle deck to the screen. “And where would we find Dr. Zito?”

Artemis tapped a few keys, zooming in on Sicily. “At his world-famous Earth Ranch. Right there in the Messina province,” he said.

Mulch stuck his head out of the bathroom. The rest was mercifully hidden behind the door.

“Did I hear you talking about a Mud Man named Zito?”

Holly turned toward the dwarf, then kept right on turning. “Yes. So what? And for heaven’s sake close the door.”

Mulch pulled the door so only a crack remained. “I was just watching a bit of human television in here, as you do. Well there’s a Zito person on CNN. Do you think it’s the same person?”

Holly grabbed a remote control from the desktop. “I really hope not,” she said. “But I’d bet my life it is.”

A group of scientists appeared on the screen. They were gathered in what looked like a prefabricated laboratory, and each wore a white coat. One stood out from the rest. He was in his mid-forties, with tanned skin, strong handsome features, and long, dark hair curling over his collar. He wore rimless glasses and a lab coat. A striped Versace shirt protruded from beneath his white lapels.

“Giovanni Zito,” said Artemis.

“It is incredible, really,” Zito was telling a reporter in slightly accented English. “We have sent crafts to other planets, and yet we have no idea what lies beneath our feet. Scientists can tell us the chemical makeup of Saturn’s rings, but we don’t honestly know what lies at the center of our own planet.”

“But probes have been sent down before,” said the reporter, trying to pretend he hadn’t just picked up this knowledge from his earpiece.

“Yes,” agreed Zito. “But only to a depth of about nine miles. We need to get through to the outer core itself, almost two thousand miles down. Imagine if the currents of liquid metal in the outer core could be harnessed. There’s enough free energy in that metal to power mankind’s machines forever.”

The reporter was skeptical. At least, the real scientist speaking in his earpiece told him to be skeptical. “But this is all speculation, Dr. Zito. Surely a voyage to the center of the earth is nothing but a fantasy? Possible only in the pages of science fiction.”

A brief flash of annoyance clouded Giovanni Zito’s features. “This is no fantasy, sir, I assure you. This is no fantastical voyage. We are sending an unmanned probe, bristling with sensors. Whatever is down there. We will find it.”

The reporter’s eyes widened in panic as a particularly technical question came over his earpiece. He listened for several seconds, mouthing the words as he heard them.

“Dr. Zito, eh . . . This probe you are sending down, I believe it will be encased in one hundred million tons of molten iron at about five and a half thousand degrees Celsius. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely,” confirmed Zito.

The reporter looked relieved. “Yes. I knew that. Anyway, my point is, it would take several years to gather so much iron. So why did you ask us here today?”

Zito clapped his hands excitedly. “This is the wonderful part. As you know the core probe was a long-term project. I had planned to accumulate the iron over the next ten years. But now, laser drilling has revealed a deep orebody of hematite, iron ore, on the bottom edge of the crust right here in Sicily. It’s incredibly rich, perhaps eighty-five percent iron. All we need to do is detonate several charges inside that deposit and we have our molten iron. I have already secured the mining permits from the government.”

The reporter asked the next question all on his own. “So, Dr. Zito, when do you detonate?”

Giovanni Zito removed two thick cigars from his lab coat pocket. “We detonate today,” he said, passing a cigar to the reporter. “Ten years early. This is a historic moment.” Zito opened the office curtains, revealing a fenced-off area of scrubland below the window. A metallic section of piping protruded from the earth in the center of the three-foot-square enclosure. As they watched, a crew of workmen clambered from the piping, moving hurriedly away from the opening. Wisps of gaseous coolant spiraled from the pipe. The men climbed into a golf trolley and exited the compound. They took shelter in a concrete bunker at the perimeter.

“There are several megatons of TNT buried at strategic points inside the orebody,”

explained Zito. "If this was detonated on the surface, it would cause an earthquake measuring seven on the Richter scale."

The reporter swallowed nervously. "Really?"

Zito laughed. "Don't worry. The charges are shaped. The blast is focused down and in. The iron will be liquefied and begin its descent to the earth's core, carrying the probe with it. We will feel nothing."

"Down and in? You're sure about that?"

"Positive," said Zito. "We are perfectly safe here."

On the wall behind the Italian doctor, a speaker squawked three times. "Dottore Zito," said a gruff voice. "All clear. All clear."

Zito picked a black remote detonator from the desk.

"The time has come," he said dreamily. He looked straight into the camera. "My darling Belinda, this is for you."

Zito pressed the button and waited, wide eyed. The room's other occupants, the dozen or so scientists and technicians, turned anxiously to various readout panels and monitors.

"We have detonation," announced one.

Sixteen yards belowground, forty-two shaped charges exploded, simultaneously liquefying one hundred and eighteen million tons of iron. The rock content was pulverized and absorbed by the metal. A pillar of smoke blew out of the cylindrical opening, but there was no detectable vibration.

"The probe is functioning at one hundred percent," said a technician.

Zito breathed out. "That was our big worry. Even though the probe is designed for exactly these conditions, the world has never seen this kind of explosion before." He turned to another lab worker. "Any movement?"

The man hesitated before answering. "Yes, Dr. Zito. We have vertical movement. Sixteen feet per second. Exactly as you hypothesized."

Below the earth's crust, a behemoth of iron and rock began its painstaking descent toward the earth's core. It chugged and churned, bubbling and hissing, prying apart the mantle below it. Inside the molten mass, a grapefruit-sized probe continued to broadcast data.

Spontaneous euphoria erupted in the laboratory. Men and women hugged each other. Cigars were lit and champagne corks popped. Someone even pulled out a violin.

"We are on our way," shouted a jubilant Zito, lighting the reporter's cigar. "Man is going to the center of the earth. Look out below!"

In the stolen LEP shuttle, Holly froze the picture. Zito's triumphant features were spread across the screen.

"Look out below," she repeated glumly. "Man is coming to the center of the earth."

* * *

The moods in the shuttle ranged from glum to desolate. Holly was taking it especially hard. The entire fairy civilization was under threat yet again, and this time Commander Root wasn't around to meet the challenge. Not only that, but since the LEP pursuit pods had blown out their communications, there was no way to warn Foaly about the probe.

"I have no doubt he already knows," said Artemis. "That centaur monitors all the human news channels."

"But he doesn't know that Opal Koboi is giving Zito the benefit of her fairy knowledge." She pointed at Giovanni's image on the screen. "Look at his eyes. The poor man has been

mesmerized so many times that his pupils are actually ragged.”

Artemis stroked his chin thoughtfully. “If I know Foaly, he’s been monitoring this project since its initiation. He probably already has a contingency plan.”

“I’m sure he has. A contingency plan for a crackpot scheme in ten years’ time that will probably never work.”

“Of course,” agreed Artemis. “As opposed to a scientifically viable scheme, right now, that has every chance of succeeding.”

Holly headed for the cockpit. “I have to turn myself in, even if I am a murder suspect. There is more at stake here than my future.”

“Steady on,” objected Mulch. “I broke out of prison for you. I have no desire to be shoved back in again.”

Artemis stepped in front of her. “Wait a minute, Holly. Think about what will happen if you do turn yourself in.”

“Artemis is right,” added Butler. “You should think about this. If the LEP is anything like human police forces, fugitives are not exactly welcomed with open arms. Open cell doors, maybe.”

Holly forced herself to stop and think, but it was difficult. Every second she waited was another second for the giant iron slug to eat its way through the mantle.

“If I give myself up to Internal Affairs, I will be taken into custody. As an LEP officer, I can be held for seventy-two hours without counsel. As a murder suspect I can be held for up to a week. Even if someone did believe that I was completely innocent, and that Opal Koboï was behind all this, it would still take at least eight hours to get clearance for an operation. But in all likelihood, my claims would be dismissed as the standard protests of the guilty. Especially with you three backing up my story. No offense.”

“None taken,” said Mulch.

Holly sat down, cradling her head in her hands. “My world is utterly gone. I keep thinking there will be a way back, but things just keep spinning farther and farther out of control.”

Artemis placed a hand on her shoulder. “Courage, Captain. Ask yourself, what would the commander do?”

Holly took three deep breaths, then sprang from her seat, back stiff with determination. “Don’t you try to manipulate me, Artemis Fowl. I make my own decisions. Even so, Julius would take care of Opal Koboï himself. So that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Excellent,” said Artemis. “In that case, we will need a strategy.”

“Right. I’ll fly the shuttle; you put that brain of yours to work and come up with a plan.”

“Each to his own,” said the boy. He sat in one of the shuttle’s chairs, gently massaged his temples with his fingertips, and began to think.

CHAPTER 9 ***DADDY’S GIRL***

The Zito Earth Farm; The Messina Province, Sicily

Opal’s plan to bring the human and fairy worlds together was one of simplicity in its execution, but genius in its conception. She simply had made it easier for a human to do what he was already thinking of doing. Almost every major energy company in the world had a *core*

probe file, but their ideas were all hypothetical, considering the amount of explosives needed to blast through the crust, and the iron necessary to get the probe through the mantle.

Opal picked Giovanni Zito from her list of prospective puppets because of two things: Zito had a large fortune, and land directly above a huge high-grade hematite orebody.

Giovanni Zito was a Sicilian engineer and a pioneer in the field of alternative power sources. A committed environmentalist, Zito developed ways of generating electricity without stripping the land or destroying the environment. The invention that had made his fortune was the Zito solar-mill. A windmill with solar panels for blades, making it many times more efficient than conventional mills.

Six weeks earlier, Zito had returned from an environmental summit in Geneva, where he had delivered the keynote address to ministers of the European Union. By the time he reached his villa on the shores of the Strait of Messina, the sunset was dropping orange blobs in the water, and Giovanni was exhausted. Talking to politicians was difficult. Even the ones who were genuinely interested in the environment were hamstrung by the ones in the pockets of big business. The *polluticians*, as the media had nicknamed them.

Giovanni ran himself a bath. The water was heated by solar panels on his roof. In fact, the entire villa was self-sufficient when it came to power. There was enough juice in the solar batteries to keep the house hot and lit for six months. All with zero emissions.

After his bath, Zito wrapped himself in a dressing gown and poured a glass of Bordeaux, settling into his favorite armchair.

Giovanni took a long draft of wine, willing the day's tension to evaporate. He cast his eyes over the familiar row of framed photographs on his wall. Most were magazine covers celebrating his technological innovations, but his favorite one, the one that made him famous, was the *Time* magazine cover that showed a younger Giovanni Zito astride a humpback whale, with a whaling ship looming over them both. The unfortunate creature had strayed into shallow waters and could not dive. So Zito had leaped from a conservationists' dinghy onto the creature's back, thus shielding it from the whalers' harpoons. Someone on the dinghy had snapped a photo, and that photo had become one of the most famous media images of the last century.

Zito smiled. Heady days. He was about to close his eyes for a quick nap before dinner, when something moved in the shadows in the corner of the room. Something small, barely the height of the table.

Zito sat straight up in his chair. "What's that? Is somebody there?"

A lamp flicked on to reveal a small girl perched on a log stool. She held the lamp cord in her hand and seemed not in the least afraid or upset in any way. In fact the girl was calm and composed, regarding Zito as if he were the intruder.

Giovanni stood. "Who are you, little one? Why are you here?"

The girl fixed him with the most incredible eyes. Deep brown eyes. Deep as a vat of chocolate.

"I am here for you, Giovanni," she said in a voice as beautiful as her eyes. In fact, everything about the girl was beautiful. Her porcelain features. And those eyes. They would not let him go.

Zito fought her spell. "For me? What do you mean? Is your mother nearby?"

The girl smiled. "Not nearby, no. You are my family now."

Giovanni tried to make sense of this simple sentence, but he could not. Was it really important? Those eyes, and that voice. So melodic. Layers of crystal tinkling.

Humans react differently to the fairy *mesmer*. Most fall immediately under its hypnotic

spell, but there are those with strong minds who need to be pushed a little. And the more they are pushed, the greater the risk of brain damage.

“I am your family now?” said Zito slowly, as though he were searching each word for meaning.

“Yes, human,” snapped Opal impatiently, pushing harder. “My family. I am your daughter, Belinda. You adopted me last month, secretly. The papers are in your bureau.”

Giovanni’s eyes lost their focus. “Adopted? Bureau?”

Opal drummed her tiny fingers on the base of the lamp. She had forgotten how dull some humans could be, especially under the *mesmer*. And this one was supposed to be a genius.

“Yes. Adopted. Bureau. You love me more than life, remember? You would do absolutely anything for your darling Belinda.”

A tear pooled on Zito’s eyelid. “Belinda. My little girl. I’d do anything for you, dear, anything.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Opal impatiently. “Of course. I said that. Just because you’re *mesmerized* doesn’t mean you have to repeat everything I say. That is so tiresome.”

Zito noticed two small creatures in the corner. Creatures with pointed ears. This fact penetrated the *mesmer*’s fugue.

“I see. Over there. Are they human?”

Opal glowered at the Brill brothers. They were supposed to stay out of sight. *Mesmerizing* a strong mind such as Zito’s was a delicate enough operation without distractions.

She added another layer to her voice. “You cannot see those figures. You will never see them again.”

Zito was relieved. “Of course. Good. Nothing at all. Mind playing tricks.”

Opal scowled. What was it about humans and grammar? At the first sign of stress, it went out the window. Mind playing tricks. Really.

“Now, Giovanni, Daddy. I think we need to talk about your next project.”

“The water-powered car?”

“No, idiot. Not the water-powered car. The core probe.

I know you have designed one. Quite a good design for a human, though I will be making changes.”

“The core probe. Impossible. Can’t get through crust. Don’t have enough iron.”

“We can’t get through *the* crust. We don’t have enough iron. Speak properly, for heaven’s sake. It’s trying enough speaking Mud Man without listening to your gibberish. Honestly, you human geniuses are not all you’re cracked up to be.”

Zito’s beleaguered brain made the effort. “I am sorry, dearest Belinda. I simply mean that the core probe project is long term. It will have to wait until we can find a practical way to gather the iron, and cut through the earth’s crust.”

Opal looked at the dazed Sicilian. “Poor dear stupid Daddy. You developed a super laser to cut through the crust. Don’t you remember?”

A dewdrop of sweat rolled down Zito’s cheek. “A super laser? Now that you mention it . . .”

“And can you guess what you’ll find when you do cut through?”

Zito could guess. Part of his intellect was still his own. “A hematite orebody? It would have to be massive. Of very high grade.”

Opal led him to the window. In the distance, the wind farm’s blades flashed in the starlight.

“And where do you think we should dig?”

“I think we should dig under the wind farm,” said Zito, resting his forehead against the cool glass.

“Very good, Daddy. If you dig there I will be ever so happy.”

Zito patted the pixie’s hair. “Ever so happy,” he said sleepily. “Belinda, my little girl. Papers are in bureau.”

“*The* papers are in *the* bureau,” corrected Opal. “If you persist with this baby talk I will have to punish you.”

She wasn’t joking.

E7, Below the Mediterranean

Holly had to stay out of the major chutes on her way to the surface. Foaly had sensors monitoring all traffic through commercial and LEP routes. This meant navigating unlit meandering secondary chutes, but the alternative was being picked up by the centaur’s bugs and hauled back to Police Plaza before the job was done.

Holly negotiated stalactites the size of skyscrapers, and skirted vast craters teeming with bioluminescent insect life. But instinct was doing the driving. Holly’s thoughts were a thousand miles away, reflecting on the events of the past twenty-four hours. It seemed as though her heart was finally catching up with her body.

All her previous adventures with Artemis were almost like comic book escapades compared to their current situation. It had always been *happy ever after* before. There had been a few close calls, but everyone had made it out alive. Holly studied her trigger finger. A faint scar circled the base where it had been severed during the Arctic incident. She could have healed the scar or covered it with a ring, but she preferred to keep it where she could see it. The scar was part of her. The commander had been a part of her too. Her superior, her friend.

Sadness emptied her out, then filled her up again. For a while, thoughts of revenge had fueled her. But now, even the thoughts of dumping Opal Koboï into a cold cell could not light a spark of vengeful joy in her heart. She would keep going to ensure that the People were safe from humans. Maybe when that task was done, it would be time to take a look at her life. Maybe there were a few things that needed changing.

Artemis summoned everyone to the passenger area as soon as he had finished work on the computer. His *new-old* memories were giving him immense pleasure. As his fingers skimmed the Gnommish keyboard, he marveled at the ease with which he navigated the fairy platform. He marveled too at the technology itself, even though he was no stranger to it anymore. The Irish boy felt the same thrill of rediscovery that a small child feels when he has chanced upon a lost favorite toy.

For the past hour, rediscovery had been a major theme in his life. Having a major theme for an hour doesn’t seem like much, but Artemis had a catalog of memories all clamoring to be acknowledged. The memories themselves were startling enough: boarding a radioactive train near Murmansk, or flying across the ocean concealed beneath LEP cam-foil. But it was the cumulative effect of these memories that interested Artemis. He could literally feel himself becoming a different person. Not exactly the way he used to be, but closer to that individual. Before the fairies had mind-wiped him as part of the Jon Spiro deal, his personality had been undergoing what could be seen as positive change. So much so that he had decided to go completely legitimate and donate ninety percent of Spiro’s massive fortune to Amnesty International. Since his mind wipe, he had reverted to his old ways, indulging his passion for criminal acts. Now he was somewhere in the middle. He had no desire to hurt or steal from the

innocent, but he was having difficulty giving up his criminal ways. Some people just needed to be stolen from.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the desire he felt to help his fairy friends, and the real sadness he felt at the loss of Julius Root. Artemis was no stranger to loss; at one time or another, he had lost and found everyone close to him. Julius's death cut him just as deeply as any of these. His drive to avenge the commander and stop Opal Koboï was more powerful than any criminal urge he had ever felt.

Artemis smiled to himself. It seemed as though good was a more powerful motivation than bad. Who would have thought it?

The rest of the group gathered around the central holographic projector. Holly had parked the shuttle on the floor of a secondary chute close to the surface.

Butler was forced to squat on his hunkers in the fairy-sized ship.

"Well, Artemis, what did you find out?" asked the bodyguard, trying to fold his massive arms without knocking someone smaller over.

Artemis activated a holographic animation, which rotated slowly in the middle of the chamber. The animation showed a cutaway of the earth from crust to core. Artemis switched on a laser pointer and began his briefing.

"As you can see, there is a distance of approximately one thousand eight hundred miles from the earth's surface to the outer core."

The projection's liquid outer core swirled and bubbled with molten magma.

"However, mankind has never managed to penetrate more than nine miles through the crust. To go any deeper would necessitate the use of nuclear warheads, or huge amounts of dynamite. An explosion of this magnitude could possibly generate huge shifts in the earth's tectonic plates, causing earthquakes and tidal waves around the globe."

Mulch was, as usual, eating something. Nobody knew what, as he had emptied the food locker over an hour since. Nobody really wanted to ask either. "That doesn't sound like a good thing."

"No, it isn't," agreed Artemis. "Which is why the ironclad probe theory has never been put into practice, until now. The original idea belongs to a New Zealander, Professor David Stevenson. It is quite brilliant, actually, if impractical. Encase a reinforced probe in a hundred million tons of molten iron. The iron will sink through the crack generated by the explosive, even closing the crack behind it. Within a week the probe will reach the core. The iron will be consumed by the outer core, and the probe will gradually disintegrate. The entire process is even environmentally sound."

The projection put Artemis's words into pictures.

"How come the iron doesn't un-melt?" asked Mulch.

Artemis raised a long thin eyebrow. "Un-melt? The orebody's sheer size stops it from solidifying."

Holly stood, stepping into the projection itself and studying the orebody. "Foaly must know all about this. Humans couldn't keep something so big a secret."

"Indeed," said Artemis, opening a second holographic projection. "I ran a search on the onboard database and found this: Foaly ran several computer simulations over eighty years ago. He concluded that the best way to deal with the threat was to simply broadcast misinformation to whatever probe was being sent down. As far as the humans were concerned, their probe would simply sink through a couple hundred miles of various low-grade ore, and then the orebody would solidify. A resounding and very expensive failure."

The computer simulation showed the information being broadcasted from Haven to the metal-encased probe. Aboveground, cartoon human scientists scratched their heads and tore up their notes.

“Most amusing,” said Artemis.

Butler was studying the hologram. “I’ve been on enough campaigns to know that there is a big hole in that strategy, Artemis,” he said.

“Yes?”

Butler struggled to his knees and traced the probe’s path with a finger. “Well, what if the probe’s journey brought it into contact with one of the People’s chutes? Once that metal punctures that chute, it’s on an express ride to Haven.”

Artemis was delighted at his bodyguard’s astuteness. “Yes. Of course. Which is why there is a supersonic attack shuttle on standby twenty-four hours a day, to divert the molten mass if the need arises. All human probe projects are monitored, and if any are judged to pose a threat, they are quietly sabotaged. If that doesn’t work, the LEP geological unit drills in under the molten mass and diverts it with some shaped charges. The orebody follows the new path blown for it, and Haven is safe. Of course, the mining shuttle has never been used.”

“There’s another problem,” added Holly. “We have to factor in Opal’s involvement. She obviously has helped Giovanni Zito drill through the crust, possibly with a fairy laser. We can presume she has upgraded the probe itself so that Foaly’s false signals will not be accepted. So her plan must be to bring that probe into contact with the People. But how?”

Artemis launched a third holographic animation, shutting down the first two. This 3-D rendering portrayed Zito’s Earth Farm and the underlying crust and mantle.

“This is what I think,” he said. “Zito, with Opal’s help, liquefies his orebody here. It begins to sink at a rate of sixteen feet per second toward the earth’s core, taking accurate readings, thanks to Koboi’s upgrades. Meanwhile, Foaly thinks his plan is working perfectly. Now, at a depth of one hundred and six miles, the metal mass comes within three miles of this major chute, E7, which emerges in southern Italy. They run parallel for one hundred and eighty-six miles, then diverge again. If Opal were to blow a crack between these two tunnels, the iron would follow the path of least resistance and flow into the chute.”

Holly felt the strength leave her limbs. “Into the chute, and straight down to Haven.”

“Exactly,” said Artemis. “This particular chute runs in a jagged westerly diagonal for twelve hundred miles, coming within five hundred yards of the city itself. With the speed the orebody will build up in free fall, it will slice off a good half of the city. Everything that’s left will be broadcasting signals for the world to hear.”

“But we have blast walls,” objected Holly.

Artemis shrugged. “Holly, there isn’t a force on earth powerful enough to stop a hundred million tons of molten hematite in free fall. Anything that gets in the way will be obliterated. Most of the iron will curve around and follow the tunnel, but enough will continue straight down to cut right through the blast walls.”

The shuttle’s occupants watched Artemis’s computer simulation in which the molten orebody smashed through Haven City’s defenses, allowing all the fairy electronic signals to be picked up by the probe.

“We are looking at a fifty-eight percent casualty rate,” said Artemis. “Possibly more.”

“How can Opal do this without Foaly’s sensors picking her up?”

“Simple,” replied Artemis. “She merely plants a shaped charge in E7 at a depth of one hundred and five miles, detonating it at the last minute. That way, by the time Foaly detects the

explosion, it will be too late to either disarm it or do anything about it.”

“So we need to remove that charge.”

Artemis smiled. If only it were that simple. “Opal will not take any chances with the charge. If she left it on the chute wall for any amount of time, a tremor could shake it free, or one of Foaly’s sensors could pick it up. I’m sure the device is well shielded, but one leak in the plating could have it broadcasting like a satellite. No, Opal will not position the charge until the last minute.”

Holly nodded. “Okay. So we wait until she plants it, then we disarm it.”

“No. If we wait in the chute, then Foaly will pick us up. If that happens, Opal will not even venture down the chute.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Not really. We may delay her for a few hours, but remember, Opal has a two-hundred-mile window to plant the charge. She can wait for the LEP to arrest us and still have ample time to complete her mission.”

Holly knuckled her eyes. “I don’t understand this. Surely everyone must know by now that Opal has escaped. Surely Foaly can put this all together.”

Artemis closed his fist. “There’s the rub. That single point is the essence of this entire situation. Foaly obviously doesn’t know that Opal has escaped. She would be the first person checked after the goblin general’s escape.”

“She was checked. I was there. When Scalene escaped, Opal was still catatonic. There’s no way she could have planned it.”

“And yet, she did,” mused Artemis. “Could that Opal have been a double?”

“Not possible. They run DNA checks every day.”

“So the Opal under surveillance had Koboi’s DNA, but little or no brain activity.”

“Exactly. She’s been that way for a year.”

Artemis thought silently for over a minute. “I wonder how far cloning technology has developed underground?”

He crossed briskly to the main computer terminal and called up LEP files on the subject.

““The mature clone is identical to the original in every way, except that its brain functions are limited to life support,”” he read. ““In greenhouse conditions, it takes one to two years to grow a clone to adulthood.”” Artemis stepped away from the computer, clapping his hands. “That’s it. That’s how she did it. She induced that coma so that her replacement would not be noticed. This is impressive stuff.”

Holly pounded a fist into her palm. “So even if we did survive the attempts on our lives, all talk of Opal’s escape would be seen as the ravings of the guilty.”

“I told Chix Verbil that Opal was back,” said Mulch. “That’s okay though, because he already thinks I’m raving.”

“With Opal on the loose,” continued the Irish youth, “the entire LEP would be on the lookout for a plot of some kind. But with Opal still deep in her coma . . .”

“There is no cause for alarm. And this probe is simply a surprise, and not an emergency.”

Artemis shut down the holographic projection. “So we’re on our own. We need to steal that final charge and detonate harmlessly above the parallel stretch. Not only that, but we need to expose Opal so she cannot simply put her plan into action all over again. Obviously to do this we need to find Opal’s shuttle.”

Mulch was suddenly uncomfortable. “You’re going after Koboi? Again? Well, best of luck. You can just drop me off at the next comer.”

Holly ignored him. "How long do we have?"

There was a calculator on the plasma screen, but Artemis didn't need it. "The orebody is sinking at a rate of sixteen feet per second. That's eleven miles per hour. At that speed it would take approximately nine and a half hours to reach the parallel stretch."

"Nine hours from now?"

"No," corrected Artemis. "From detonation, which was almost two hours ago."

Holly walked rapidly into the cockpit and strapped herself into the pilot's chair. "Seven and a half hours to save the world. Isn't there some law that says we get at least twenty-four?"

Artemis strapped himself into the copilot's chair. "I don't think Opal bothers with laws," he said. "Now, can you talk while you fly? There are a few things I need to know about shuttles and charges."

CHAPTER 10

HORSE SENSE

Police Plaza, Haven City, The Lower Elements

Everybody in Police Plaza was all talk about the Zito probe. In truth it was a bit of a distraction from recent events. The LEP didn't lose many officers in the field. And now two in the same shift. Foaly was taking it hard, especially the loss of Holly Short. It was one thing to lose a friend in the line of duty, but for that friend to be falsely accused of murder was unbearable. Foaly could not stand the idea that the People would forever remember Holly as a cold-blooded killer. Captain Short was innocent. What's more, she was a decorated hero, and deserved to be remembered as such.

A com screen flickered into life on his wall. One of his technical assistants in the outer office appeared. The elf's pointed ears were quivering with excitement.

"The probe is down to sixty-five miles. I can't believe the humans have gotten this far."

Foaly opened a screen on his wall. He couldn't believe it either. In theory, it should have been decades before humans developed a laser sophisticated enough to puncture the crust without frying half a continent. Obviously, Giovanni Zito went right ahead and developed the laser without worrying about Foaly's projections for his species.

Foaly almost regretted having to shut Zito's project down. The Sicilian was one of the brightest hopes for the human race. His plan to harness the power of the outer core was a good one, but the cost was fairy exposure, and that was too high a price to pay.

"Keep a close eye on it," he said, trying to sound interested. "Especially when it runs parallel to E7. I don't anticipate any trouble, but eyes peeled just in case."

"Yes, sir. Oh, and we have Captain Verbil on line two, from the surface."

A tiny spark of interest lit the centaur's eyes. Verbil? The sprite had allowed Mulch Diggums to steal an LEP shuttle. Mulch escaped a few hours after his friends on the force had been killed. Coincidence? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Foaly opened a window to the surface. In it he could see Verbil's chest.

Foaly sighed. "Chix! You're hovering. Come down where I can see you."

"Sorry," said Chix, alighting on the floor. "I'm a bit emotional. Trouble Kelp gave me a real grilling."

"What do you want, Chix? A hug and a kiss? I have things on my mind here."

Verbil's wings flared up behind him. It was a real effort to stay on the ground. "I have a

message for you, from Mulch Diggums.”

Foaly fought the urge to whinny. No doubt Mulch would have some choice words for him.

“Go on, then. Tell me what our foul-mouthed friend thinks of me.”

“This is between us, right? I don’t want to be pensioned off on the grounds that I’m unstable.”

“Yes, Chix, it’s between us. Everyone has a right to be temporarily unstable. Today of all days.”

“It’s ridiculous, really. I don’t believe it for a minute.” Chix attempted a confident chuckle.

Foaly snapped. “What’s ridiculous? What don’t you believe? Tell me, Chix, or I’ll reach down this com link and drag it out of you.”

“Are we secure?”

“Yes!” the centaur screeched. “We’re secure. Tell me. Give me Mulch’s message.”

Chix took a deep breath, saying the words as he let it out. “Opal Koboi is back.”

Foaly’s laughter started somewhere around his hooves and grew in volume and intensity until it burst out of his mouth. “Opal is back! Koboi is back! I get it now. Mulch conned you into letting him steal the shuttle. He played on your fear of Opal waking up, and you bought it. Opal is back; don’t make me laugh.”

“That’s what he said,” Chix mumbled sulkily. “There’s no need to laugh so hard. You’re spitting on the screen. I have feelings, you know.”

Foaly’s laughter petered out. It wasn’t real laughter anyway, it was just an outburst of emotion. Mostly sadness, with some frustration mixed in.

“Okay, Chix. It’s not your fault. Mulch has fooled smarter sprites than you.”

It took Chix a moment to realize that he was being insulted.

“It could be true,” he said, miffed. “You could be wrong. It *is* possible, you know. Maybe Opal Koboi conned you.”

Foaly opened another window on his wall. “No, Verbil, it is not possible. Opal could not be back, because I’m looking at her right now.”

Live feed from the Argon Clinic confirmed that Opal was indeed still suspended in her coma harness. She’d had her DNA swab minutes beforehand.

Chix’s petulance crumbled. “I can’t believe it,” he muttered. “Mulch seemed so sincere. I actually thought Holly was in danger.”

Foaly’s tail twitched. “What? Mulch said Holly was in danger? But Holly is gone. She died.”

“Yes,” said Chix morosely. “Mulch was shoveling more horse dung, I suppose. No offense.”

Of course. Opal would set Holly up to take the blame for Julius. That little cruel touch would be just like Opal. If she wasn’t right there, in her harness. DNA never lies.

Chix rapped the screen surround at his end, to get Foaly’s attention. “Listen, Foaly, remember what you promised. This is between us. No need for anyone else to know I got duped by a dwarf. I’ll end up scraping vole curry off the sidewalk after crunchball matches.”

Foaly absently shut the window. “Yes, whatever. Between us. Right.”

Opal was still secure. No doubt about it. Surely she couldn’t have escaped. If she had, then maybe this probe was more sinister than it seemed. She couldn’t have escaped. It wasn’t possible.

But Foaly's paranoid streak couldn't let it go. Just to be sure, there were a few little tests he could perform. He really should get authorization, but if he was wrong, nobody had to know. And if he was right, nobody would care about a few hours of computer time.

The centaur ran a quick search on the surveillance database and selected the footage from the chute access tunnel where Julius had died. There was something he wanted to check.

Uncharted Chute, Three Miles Below Southern Italy

The stolen shuttle made good time to the surface. Holly flew as fast as she could without burning the gearbox or smashing them into a chute wall. Time may have been of the essence, but the motley crew would be of little use to anyone if they had to be scraped off the wall like so much crunchy pâté.

"These old rigs are mainly for watch changes," explained Holly. "The LEP got this one secondhand at a criminal assets auction. It's souped up to avoid customs ships. It used to belong to a curry smuggler."

Artemis sniffed. A faint yellow odor still lingered in the cockpit. "Why would anyone smuggle curry?"

"Extra-hot curry is illegal in Haven. Living underground, we have to be careful of emissions, if you catch my drift."

Artemis caught her drift and decided not to pursue the subject.

"We need to locate Opal's shuttle before we venture aboveground and give our position away."

Holly pulled over next to a small lake of black oil, the shuttle's downdraft rippling the surface.

"Artemis, I think I mentioned that it's a stealth shuttle. Nothing can detect her. We don't have sensors sophisticated enough to spot her. Opal and her pixie sidekicks could be sitting in their craft just around the next bend, and our computers wouldn't pick them up."

Artemis leaned in over the dashboard readouts. "You're approaching this the wrong way, Holly. We need to find out where the shuttle is not."

Artemis launched various scans, searching for traces of certain gases within a hundred-mile radius. "I think we can assume that the stealth shuttle is very close to E7, perhaps right at the mouth; but that still leaves us with a lot of ground to cover, especially if our eyes are all we have to rely on."

"That's what I've been saying. But do go on; I'm sure you have a point."

"So I'm using this shuttle's limited sensor dishes to scan from here right up the chute to the surface and down about thirty miles."

"Scanning for what?" said Holly in exasperation. "A hole in the air?"

Artemis grinned. "Exactly. You see, normal space is made up of various gases: oxygen, hydrogen, and so on, but the stealth shuttle would prevent any of these from being detected inside the ship's hull. So if we find a small patch of space without the usual ambient gasses . . ."

"Then we've found the stealth shuttle," said Holly.

"Exactly."

The computer completed its scan quickly, building an on-screen model of the surrounding area. The gases were displayed in various whirling hues.

Artemis instructed the computer to search for anomalies. It found three: one with an abnormally high saturation of carbon monoxide.

"That's probably an airport. A lot of exhaust fumes."

The second anomaly was a large area with only trace elements of any gas.

“A vacuum, probably a computer plant,” surmised Artemis.

The third anomaly was a small area just outside the lip of E7 that appeared to contain no gas of any kind.

“That’s her. The volume is exactly right. She’s on the north side of the chute entrance.”

“Well done,” said Holly, punching him lightly on the shoulder. “Let’s get up there.”

“You know, of course, that as soon as we put our nose into the main chute system, Foaly will pick us up.”

Holly gave the engines a few seconds to warm up. “It’s too late to worry about that. Haven is more than six hundred miles away. By the time anyone gets here, we’ll either be heroes or outlaws.”

“We’re already outlaws,” said Artemis.

“True,” agreed Holly. “But soon we could be outlaws with no one chasing us.”

Police Plaza, The Lower Elements

Opal Koboi was back. Could it be possible? The thought niggled at Foaly’s ordered mind, unraveling any chain of thought that he tried to compose. He would not find any peace until he found out for certain. One way or the other.

The first place to check was the video footage from E37. If one began with the assumption that Koboi was indeed alive, then a number of details could be explained. Firstly, the strange haze that had appeared on all the tapes was not simply interference, but manufactured to hide something. The loss of audio signal, too, could have been orchestrated by Koboi to cover whatever had passed between Holly and Julius in the tunnel. And the calamitous explosion could have been Koboi’s doing and not Holly’s. The possibility brought tremendous peace to Foaly, but he contained it. He hadn’t proven anything yet.

Foaly ran the tape through a few filters without result. The strange blurred section refused to be sharpened, cloned, or shifted. That in itself was unusual. If the blurred spot was just computer glitchery, Foaly should have been able to do something about it. But the indistinct patch stood its ground, repelling everything Foaly threw at it.

You may have the hi-tech ground covered, thought the centaur, but what about good old lo-tech?

Foaly zoomed the footage to moments before the explosion. The blurred patch had transferred itself to Julius’s chest, and indeed at times, the commander appeared to be looking at it. Was there an explosive device under there? If so, then it must have been remotely detonated. The jammer signal was probably sent from the same remote. The detonation command would override all other signals, including the jammer. This meant that for perhaps a thousandth of a second before detonation, whatever was on Julius’s chest would become visible. Not long enough for the fairy eye to capture, but a camera would see it just fine.

Foaly fast-forwarded to the explosion and then began to work his way backward, frame by frame. It was agonizing work, watching his friend being reassembled by the reversed film. The centaur tried to ignore it and concentrate on the work. The flames shrank from orange plumes to white shards, eventually containing themselves inside an orange minisun. Then, for a single frame, something appeared. Foaly flicked past it, then returned. There! On Julius’s chest, right where the blur used to be. A device of some kind.

Foaly’s fingers jabbed the enlarge tool. There was a square foot metal panel secured to Julius’s chest with octo-bonds. It had been picked up by the camera for a single frame. Less than one thousandth of a second, which was why it had been missed by the investigators. On the face of the panel was a plasma screen. Someone had been communicating with the commander before

he died. That someone had not wanted to be overheard, hence the audio jammer. Unfortunately, the screen was now blank, as the detonation signal which disrupted the jammer would also have disrupted the video.

But I know who it is, thought Foaly. It's Opal Koboi, back from limbo.

But he needed proof. The centaur's word was worth about as much to Ark Sool as a dwarf's denial that he had passed wind.

Foaly glared at the live feed from the Argon Institute. There she was. Opal Koboi, still deep in her coma. Apparently.

How did you do it? Foaly wondered. How could you swap places with another fairy?

Plastic surgery wouldn't do it. Surgery couldn't change DNA. Foaly opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a piece of equipment that resembled two miniature kitchen plungers.

There was only one way to find out what was going on here. He would have to ask Opal directly.

When Foaly arrived at the institute, Dr. Argon was reluctant to allow him into Opal's room.

"Miss Koboi is in a deep state of catatonia," said the gnome peevishly. "Who knows what effect your devices will have on her psyche. It's difficult, nigh impossible, to explain to a layfairy what damage intrusive stimuli may have on the recovering mind."

Foaly whinnied. "You had no trouble letting the TV networks in. I suppose they pay better than the LEP. I do hope you are not beginning to view Opal as your personal possession, Doctor. She is a state prisoner, and I can have her moved to a state facility any time I like."

"Maybe just five minutes," said Jerbal Argon, tapping in the door's security code.

Foaly clopped past him and plonked his briefcase on the table. Opal swung gently in the draft from the doorway. And it did seem to be Opal. Even this close, with every feature in focus, Foaly would have sworn that this was his old adversary. The same Opal who had competed with him for every prize at college. The same Opal who had very nearly succeeded in having him blamed for the goblin uprising.

"Get her down from there," he ordered.

Argon positioned a bunk below the harness, complaining with every step. "I shouldn't be doing physical labor," he moaned. "It's my hip. No one knows the pain I'm in. No one. The warlocks can't do a thing for me."

"Don't you have staff to do this sort of thing?"

"Normally, yes," said Argon, lowering the harness. "But my janitors are on leave. Both at the same time. Normally I wouldn't allow it, but good pixie workers are hard to find."

Foaly's ears pricked up. "Pixies? Your janitors are pixies?"

"Yes. We're quite proud of them around here, minor celebrities, you know. The pixie twins. And of course they have the highest respect for me."

Foaly's hands shook as he unpacked his equipment. It all seemed to be coming together. First Chix, then the strange device on Julius's chest, now pixie janitors who were on leave. He just needed one more piece of the puzzle.

"What is it you have there?" asked Argon anxiously. "Nothing that could cause any damage."

Foaly tilted the unconscious pixie's head backward. "Don't worry, Argon. It's just a Retimager. I'm not going in any farther than the eyeballs."

He held open the pixie's eyes one at a time, sealing the plunger like cups around the sockets. "Every image is recorded on the retinas. This leaves a trail of microscratches that can be

enhanced and read.”

“I know what a Retimager is,” snapped Argon. “I do read science journals occasionally, you know. So you can tell what the last thing Opal saw was. What good will that do?”

Foaly connected the eyepieces to a wall computer. “We shall see,” he said, endeavoring to sound cryptic rather than desperate.

He opened the Retimager’s program on the plasma screen, and two dark images appeared.

“Left and right eyes,” explained Foaly, toggling a key until the two images overlapped. The image was obviously a head from a side angle, but it was too dark to identify.

“Ooh, such brilliance,” gushed Argon sarcastically. “Shall I call the networks? Or should I just faint in awe?”

Foaly ignored him. “Lighten and enhance,” he said to the computer.

A computer-generated paintbrush swabbed the screen, leaving a brighter and sharper picture behind it.

“It’s a pixie,” muttered Foaly. “But still not enough detail.” He scratched his chin. “Computer, match this picture with patient Koboi, Opal.”

A picture of Opal flashed up on a separate window. It resized itself and revolved until the new picture was at the same angle as the original. Red arrows flashed between the pictures, connecting identical points. After a few moments the space between the two pictures was completely blitzed with red lines.

“Are these two pictures of the same person?” asked Foaly.

“Affirmative,” said the computer. “Though there is a point zero five percent possibility of error.”

Foaly jabbed the PRINT button. “I’ll take those odds.”

Argon stepped closer to the screen, as though in a daze. His face was pale, and growing paler as he realized the implications of the picture.

“She saw herself from the side,” he whispered. “That means ...”

“There were two Opal Kobois,” completed Foaly. “The real one, that you let escape. And this shell here, which can only be ...”

“A clone.”

“Precisely,” said Foaly, plucking the hard copy from the printer. “She had herself cloned, and then your janitors waltzed her right out of here under your nose.”

“Oh dear.”

“Oh dear hardly covers it. Maybe now would be a good time to call the networks, or faint in awe.”

Argon took the second option, collapsing to the floor in a limp heap. The sudden evaporation of his dreams of fame and fortune was too much to handle all at once.

Foaly stepped over him and galloped all the way to Police Plaza.

E7, Southern Italy

Opal Koboi was having a hard time being patient. She had used up every last drop of her patience in the Argon Clinic. And now she wanted things to happen on her command. Unfortunately, a hundred million tons of hematite will only sink through the earth at sixteen feet per second, and there isn’t a lot anybody can do about it. Opal decided to pass the time by watching Holly Short die. That cretinous captain. Who did she think she was, with her crew cut and cute bow lips? Opal glanced at herself in a reflective surface. Now, there was real beauty. There was a face that deserved its own currency, and it was quite possible that she would soon

have it.

“Mervall,” she snapped. “Bring me the Eleven Wonders disk. I need something to cheer me up.”

“Right away, Miss Koboi,” said Merv. “Would you like me to finish preparing the meal first, or bring you the disk directly.”

Opal rolled her eyes at her reflection. “What did I just say?”

“You said to bring you the disk.”

“So what do you think you should do, my dearest Mervall?”

“I think I should bring you the disk,” said Merv.

“Genius, Mervall. Pure genius.”

Merv left the shuttle’s kitchenette and ejected a disk from the recorder. The computer would have the film on its hard drive, but Miss Koboi liked to have her personal favorites on disk so she could be cheered up wherever she happened to be. Highlights from the past included her father’s nervous breakdown, the attack on Police Plaza, and Foaly bawling his eyes out in the LEP operation’s booth.

Merv handed the disk to Opal.

“And?” said the tiny pixie.

Merv was stumped for a moment, then he remembered. One of Opal’s new commandments was that the Brill brothers should bow when they approached their leader. He swallowed his pride and bowed low from the waist.

“Better. Now, weren’t you supposed to be preparing dinner?”

Merv retreated, still bowing. There was a lot of pride-swallowing going on around here in the last few hours. Opal was unhappy with the level of service and respect provided by the Brill brothers, and so she had drawn up a list of rules. These directives included the aforementioned bowing, never looking Opal in the eyes, going outside the shuttle to pass wind, and not thinking too loudly within ten feet of their employer.

“Because I know what you are thinking,” Opal had said, in a low tremulous voice. “I can see your thoughts swirling around your head. Right now, you’re marveling at how beautiful I am.”

“Uncanny,” gasped Merv, while traitorously wondering if there was a cuckoo flitting about her head at that very moment. Opal was going seriously off the rails with all this changing her species and world domination. Scant and himself would have deserted her by now, if she hadn’t promised that they could have Barbados when she was Queen of the Earth. That and the fact that if they deserted her now, Opal would add the Brill brothers to her vengeance list.

Merv retreated to the kitchen and continued with his efforts to prepare Miss Koboi’s food without actually touching it. Another new rule. Meanwhile, Scant was in the cargo bay checking the detonator relays on the last two shaped charges. One for the job, and one for backup. The charges were about the size of melons, but would make a much bigger mess if they exploded. He checked that the magnetic relay pods were secure on the casings. The relays were standard mining sparker units that would accept the signal from the remote detonator and send a neutron charge into the bellies of the charges.

Scant winked at his brother through the kitchen doorway.

Merv pursed his lips in silent imitation of a cuckoo. Scant nodded wearily. They were both getting tired of Opal’s outrageous behavior. Only the thought of drinking piña colodas on the beach in Barbados kept them going.

Opal, oblivious to all the discontent in her camp, popped the video disk into the

multidrive. To watch one's enemies die in glorious color and surround sound was surely one of the greatest advantages of technology. Several video windows opened on the screen. Each one represented the view from one of the hemisphere's cameras.

Opal watched delightedly as Holly and Artemis were driven into the river by a pack of slobbering trolls. She oohed and aahed as they took refuge on the tiny island of corpses. Her tiny heart beat faster as they scaled the temple scaffolding. She was about to instruct Mervall to fetch her some chocolate truffles from the booty box to go with the movie, when the cameras blacked out.

"Mervall," she squealed, wringing her delicate fingers. "Descant! Get in here."

The Brill brothers rushed into the lounge, handguns drawn.

"Yes, Miss Koboi?" said Scant, laying the shaped charges down on a fur-covered lounge.

Opal covered her face. "Don't look at me!" she ordered.

Scant lowered his eyes. "Sorry. No eye contact. I forgot."

"And stop thinking that."

"Yes, Miss Koboi. Sorry, Miss Koboi." Scant had no idea what he was supposed to be thinking, so he tried to blank out everything.

Opal crossed her arms and tapped her fingers on her forearms until both brothers were bowed before her.

"Something has gone wrong," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "Our Temple of Artemis cameras seem to have malfunctioned."

Merv backed the footage up to the last image. In it the trolls were advancing on Artemis and Holly across the temple roof.

"It looks like they were done for anyway, Miss Koboi."

"Yep," agreed Scant. "No way out of that one."

Opal cleared her throat. "Firstly, *yep* is not a word, and I will not be spoken to in slang. New rule. Secondly, I assumed that Artemis Fowl was dead once before, and I spent a year in a coma as a result. We must proceed as though Fowl and Short have survived and are on our trail."

"With respect, Miss Koboi," said Merv, directing the words at his own toes. "This is a stealth shuttle; we didn't leave a trail."

"Moron," said Opal casually. "Our trail is on every television screen aboveground, and doubtless below it. Even if Artemis Fowl were not a genius, he would guess that I am behind the Zito probe. We need to plant the final charge now. How deep is the probe?"

Scant consulted a computer readout. "One hundred miles. We have ninety minutes to go to the optimum blast point."

Opal paced the deck for a few moments. "We have not picked up any communication with Police Plaza, so if they are alive they are alone. Best not to risk it. We will plant the charge now and guard it. Descant, check the casings again. Mervall, run a system's check on the shuttle. I don't want a single ion escaping through the hull."

The pixie twins stepped backward, bowing as they went. They would do as they were told, but surely the boss was being a bit paranoid.

"I heard that thought," screeched Opal. "I am not paranoid!"

Merv stepped behind a steel partition to shield his brain waves. Had Miss Koboi really intercepted the thought? Or was it just the paranoia again? After all, paranoid people usually believe that everyone thinks they are paranoid. Merv poked his head out from behind the partition and beamed a thought at Opal, just to be sure.

Holly Short is prettier than you, he thought as loudly as he could. A treasonous thought, to be sure. One Opal could hardly fail to pick up on if she could indeed read minds.

Opal stared at him. "Mervall?"

"Yes, Miss Koboi?"

"You're looking directly at me. That's very bad for my skin."

"Sorry, Miss Koboi," said Merv, averting his eyes. His eyes happened to glance through the cockpit windshield, toward the mouth of the chute. He was just in time to see an LEP shuttle rise through the holographic rock outcrop that covered the shuttlebay door. "Em, Miss Koboi, we have a problem." He pointed out the windshield.

The shuttle had risen to thirty feet and was hovering above the Italian landscape, obviously searching for something.

"They've found us," said Opal in a horrified whisper. Then she quelled her panic, quickly analyzing the situation.

"That is a transport shuttle, not a pursuit vehicle," she noted, walking quickly into the cockpit, closely followed by the twins. "We must assume that Artemis Fowl and Captain Short are aboard. They have no weapons and only basic scanners. In this poor light we are virtually invisible to the naked eye. They are blind."

"Should we blast them from the skies?" asked the younger Brill brother eagerly. At last some of the action he had been promised.

"No," replied Opal. "A plasma burst would give our position to human and fairy police satellites. We go silent. Turn off everything. Even life support. I don't know how they got this close, but the only way they're going to find out our exact location is to run into us. And if that happens, their sad little shuttle will crumple like cardboard."

The Brills obeyed promptly, switching off all of the shuttle's systems.

"Good," whispered Opal, placing a slim finger over her lips. They watched the shuttle for several minutes until Opal decided to break the silence.

"Whoever is passing wind, please stop it, or I will devise a fitting punishment."

"It wasn't me," mouthed the Brill brothers simultaneously. Neither was anxious to find out what the fitting punishment for passing wind was.

E7, Ten Minutes Earlier

Holly eased the LEP shuttle through a particularly tricky secondary shaft and into E7. Almost immediately, two red lights began pulsing on the console.

"The clock is ticking," she announced. "We just triggered two of Foaly's sensors. They're going to put the shuttle together with the probe and come running."

"How long?" asked Artemis.

Holly calculated in her head. "If they come supersonic in the attack shuttle, less than half an hour."

"Perfect," said Artemis, pleased.

"I'm glad you think so," moaned Mulch. "Supersonic LEP officers are never a welcome sight among burglars. As a general rule we prefer our police officers subsonic."

Holly clamped the shuttle to a rocky outcrop on the chute wall. "Are you backing out, Mulch? Or is just the usual moaning?"

The dwarf rotated his jaw, warming it up for the work ahead. "I think I'm entitled to a little moan. Why do these plans always involve me putting myself in harm's way, while you three get to wait it out in the shuttle?"

Artemis handed him a cooler sack from the galley. "Because you are the only one who

can do this, Mulch. You alone can foil Koboi's plan."

Mulch was not impressed. "I'm not impressed," he said. "I'd better get a medal for this. Real gold, too. No more gold-plated computer disks."

Holly hustled him to the starboard hatch. "Mulch, if they don't lock me in prison for the rest of my life, I will start the campaign to give you the biggest medal in the LEP cabinet."

"And amnesty for any past and future crimes?"

Holly opened the hatch. "Past, maybe. Future, not a chance. But no guarantees. I'm not exactly flavor of the month at Police Plaza."

Mulch tucked the sack inside his shirt. "Okay. Possible big medal and probable amnesty. I'll take it." He put one foot outside onto the flat surface of the rock. Tunnel wind sucked at his leg, threatening to tumble him into the abyss. "We meet back here in twenty minutes."

Artemis handed the dwarf a small walkie-talkie from the LEP locker. "Remember the plan," shouted Artemis over the roar of the wind. "Don't forget to leave the communicator. Only steal what you are supposed to. Nothing else."

"Nothing else," echoed Mulch, looking none too pleased. After all, who knew what valuables Opal may have lying about up there. "Unless something really jumps out at me."

"Nothing," insisted Artemis. "Now, are you sure you can get in?"

Mulch's grin revealed rows of rectangular teeth. "I can get in. You just make sure their power is off and they're looking the other way."

Butler hefted the bag of tricks that he had brought with him from Fowl Manor. "Don't worry, Mulch. They'll be looking the other way. I guarantee it."

Police Plaza, The Lower Elements

All the brass were in the Operations Room, watching live television updates on the probe's progress when Foaly burst in.

"We need to talk," blurted the centaur to the general assembly.

"Quiet," hissed Council Chairman Cahartez. "Have a bowl of curry."

Chairman Cahartez ran a fleet of curry vans in Haven City. Vole curry was his specialty. Obviously he was catering this little viewing session.

Foaly ignored the buffet table. He snatched a remote control from a chair armrest and muted the master volume.

"We have big trouble, ladies and gentlemen. Opal Koboi is loose, and I think she's behind the Zito probe."

A high-back swivel chair swung around. Ark Sool was lounging in it. "Opal Koboi? Amazing. And she's doing all this psychically, I suppose."

"No. What are you doing in that chair? That's the commander's chair. The real commander, not Internal Affairs."

Sool tapped the golden acorns on his lapel. "I've been promoted."

Foaly blanched. "You're the new Recon commander?"

Sool's smile could have illuminated a dark room. "Yes. The Council felt that Recon had been getting a bit out of hand lately. They felt, and I must say I agree, that Recon needs a firm hand. Of course I will stay on at Internal Affairs until a suitable replacement can be found."

Foaly scowled. There was no time for this. Not now. He had to get clearance for a supersonic launch immediately.

"Okay, Sool, Commander. I can lodge my objection later. Right now we have an emergency on our hands."

Everyone was listening now. But none with much enthusiasm, except Commander

Vinyaya who had always been a staunch supporter of Julius Root, and would certainly have not voted for Sool. Vinyaya was all ears.

“What’s the emergency, Foaly?” she asked.

Foaly slipped a computer disk into the room’s multidrive. “That thing in the Argon Clinic is not Opal Koboi; it’s a clone.”

“Evidence?” demanded Sool.

Foaly highlighted a window on the screen. “I scanned her retinas and found that the last image the clone saw was Opal Koboi herself. Obviously during her escape.”

Sool was not convinced. “I’ve never trusted your gadgets, Foaly. Your Retimager is not accepted as actual evidence in a courtroom.”

“We’re not in a courtroom, Sool,” said Foaly through ground teeth. “If we accept that Opal could be loose, then the events of the past twenty-four hours take on a whole new significance. A pattern begins to emerge. Scalene is dead, pixies are missing from the clinic, Julius is murdered, and Holly is blamed. Then within hours of this, a probe is sent down a decade ahead of schedule. Koboi is behind all of this. That probe is on its way here and we’re sitting around watching it on PPTV . . . eating stinking vole curry!”

“I object to the disparaging curry remark,” said Cahartez, wounded. “But otherwise I get your point.”

Sool jumped from his chair. “What point? Foaly is connecting dots that don’t exist. All he is trying to do is exonerate his late friend, Captain Short.”

“Holly may be alive!” snapped Foaly. “And trying to do something about Opal Koboi.”

Sool rolled his eyes. “But her vitals flatlined, centaur. We remote-destructed her helmet. I was there, remember?”

A head poked into the room. One of Foaly’s lab apprentices. “I got that case, sir,” he panted. “Quick as I could.”

“Well done, Roob,” said Foaly, snatching the case from the apprentice’s hand. He spun the case around. “I issued Holly and Julius with new suits. Prototypes. They both have bio-sensors and trackers. They are not linked with the LEP mainframe. I never thought to check them earlier. Holly’s helmet may be out of action, but her suit is still functioning.”

“What do the suit’s sensors tell us, Foaly?” asked Vinyaya.

Foaly was almost afraid to look. If the suit sensors were flatlining, it would be like losing Holly again. He counted to three, then consulted the small screen in the case. There were two readouts on the screen. One was flat. Julius. But the other was active in all areas.

“Holly is alive!” shouted the centaur, kissing Commander Vinyaya soundly on the cheek. “Alive and reasonably well, apart from elevated blood pressure and next to zero magic in her tank.”

“And where is she?” asked Vinyaya, smiling.

Foaly enlarged the locator section of the screen. “On her way up E7, in the shuttle that was stolen by Mulch Diggums, if I’m not mistaken.”

Sool was delighted. “Let me get this straight. Murder suspect Holly Short is in a stolen chute next to the Zito probe.”

“That’s right.”

“That would make her the prime suspect in any irregularities concerning the probe.”

Foaly was very tempted to actually trample Sool, but he held his temper in check, for Holly’s sake. “All I’m asking, Sool, is that you give me a green light to send the supersonic shuttle to investigate. If I’m right, then your first act as Commander will be to avert a calamity.”

“And if you’re wrong? Which you probably are.”

“If I’m wrong, then you get to bring in public enemy number one, Captain Holly Short.”

Sool stroked his goatee. It was a win-win situation. “Very well. Send the shuttle. How long will it take to prep?”

Foaly pulled a phone from his pocket and hit a number on the speed dial.

“Major Kelp,” he said into the mouthpiece. “Green light. Go.” Foaly smiled at Ark Sool. “I briefed Major Kelp on my way over. I felt sure you’d see it my way. Commanders generally do.”

Sool scowled. “Don’t get familiar with me, ponyboy. This is not the start of a beautiful relationship. I’m sending the shuttle because it is the only option. If you are somehow manipulating me, or bending the truth, I will bury you in tribunal hearings for the next five years. Then I will fire you.”

Foaly ignored him. There would be plenty of time for trading threats later. He needed to concentrate on the shuttle’s progress. He had gone through the shock of Holly’s death once before; he did not intend to go through it again.

E7

Mulch Diggums could have been an athlete. He had the jaw and recycling equipment for sprint digging, or even cross-country. Plenty of natural ability, but no dedication.

He tried it for a couple of months in college, but the strict regime of training and diet did not suit him. Mulch could still remember his college tunneling coach giving him a pep talk after training one night.

“You got the jaw, Diggums,” the old dwarf admitted. “And you sure got the behind. I ain’t never seen no one who could pump out the bubbles like you do. But you ain’t got the heart, and that’s what’s important.”

Maybe the old dwarf was right: Mulch never did have the heart for selfless activity. Tunneling was a lonely job, and there wasn’t much money in it either. And because it was an ethnic sport, the TV networks were not interested. No advertising meant no big pay deals for the athletes. Mulch decided his digging prowess could be more profitably utilized on the shady side of the law. Maybe if he had some gold, then female dwarfs would be more likely to return his calls.

And now here he was, breaking all his rules, preparing to break into a craft that was bristling with fairy sensors *and* occupied by armed hostiles. Just to help someone else. Of all the vehicles on the planet or under it, Artemis just had to get into the most technologically advanced shuttle in existence. Every square inch of the stealth shuttle’s plating would be alarmed with lasers, motion sensors, static sheets, and who knew what else. Still, alarms were no good if they weren’t activated, and that was what Mulch was counting on.

Mulch waved good-bye in the general direction of the shuttle, just in case anyone was still watching him, and traversed the rocky outcrop to the safety of the chute wall. Dwarfs do not like heights, and being technically below sea level was not helping his vertigo.

The dwarf sank his fingers into a vein of soft clay sprouting through the rock wall. Home. Anywhere on earth was home to a dwarf, as long as there was clay. Mulch felt calm settle over him. He was safe now, for the time being, at any rate.

The dwarf unhinged his jaw with twin cracks that would make any other sentient species wince. He popped the snaps on his bum-flap and launched himself into the clay. His gnashing teeth scooped buckets of clay from the chute wall, creating an instant tunnel. Mulch crawled into the space, sealing the cavity behind him with recycled clay from his rear end.

After half a dozen mouthfuls, the sonar filaments in his hair detected a shelf of rock ahead, so he adjusted his course accordingly. The stealth shuttle would not be set down on rock because it was top of the range, and as such would have a battery rod. The rods telescoped from the belly of the ship, drilling fifty feet below the ground and recharging the shuttle's batteries with the power of the earth. The cleanest of energies.

The battery rod vibrated slightly as it harvested, and it was this vibration that Mulch homed in on now. It took him just over five minutes of steady munching to clear the rock shelf and reach the tip of the battery rod. The vibrations had already loosened the earth, and it was a simple matter for Mulch to clear himself a little cave. He spread saliva on the walls and waited.

Holly piloted the LEP craft through the small shuttleport, overriding the shuttle doors with her Recon access code. Police Plaza hadn't bothered to change her code, because as far as they were concerned, she was dead.

A sheet of black rain clouds was spreading shadows across the Italian countryside as they cleared the holographic outcrop that shielded the shuttleport. A light frost coated the reddish clay, and a southerly wind lifted the shuttle's tail.

"We can't stay out here for long," said Holly, throttling back to a hover. "This transporter doesn't have defenses."

"We won't need long," said Artemis. "Fly in a grid search pattern, as though we're not certain where exactly the stealth shuttle is."

Holly punched some coordinates into the flight computer. "You're the genius."

Artemis turned to Butler, who was cross-legged in the aisle. "Now, old friend, can you make certain that Opal is looking this way?"

"Can do," said Butler, crawling to the port side exit. He knuckled the access button and the door slid back. The shuttle bucked slightly as the cabin pressure equalized, then settled.

Butler opened his bag of weaponry and selected a handful of metal spheres, roughly the size of tennis balls. He flicked back the safety cap on one, then depressed the button below with his thumb. The button began to rise to its original position.

"Ten seconds until the button is flush with the surface. Then it makes a connection."

"Thank you for the lecture," said Artemis dryly. "Though now is hardly the time."

Butler smiled, tossing the metal sphere into the air. Five seconds later it exploded, blowing a small crater in the earth below. Scorch lines emanated from the crater, giving it the appearance of a black flower.

"I bet Opal is looking now," said Butler, priming the next grenade.

"I'm sure others will be looking soon. Explosions don't tend to go unnoticed for long. We are relatively isolated here. The nearest village is approximately ten miles away. If we are lucky, that gives us a ten-minute window. Next grid square, please, Holly. But not too close; we don't want to scare them off."

Fifty feet below the ground, Mulch Diggums waited in his little DIY cave, watching the tip of the battery rod. As soon as it stopped vibrating, he began working his way upward through the loose clay. The telescopic rod was warm to the touch, heated by the energy it conducted to the shuttle's batteries. Mulch used it to help him on his journey, pulling himself upward, hand over hand. The clay he consumed was broken and aerated from the rod's drilling action, and Mulch was glad for that extra air. He converted it to wind, using it to boost himself upward.

Mulch increased his pace, pumping the air and clay through his recycling passages. Opal would only be distracted by the shuttle for so long before it occurred to her that it was a diversion. The rod thickened as he went along, until he arrived at a rubber seal in the belly of the

shuttle itself, which was raised on three retractable legs two feet off the ground. When the shuttle was in flight, this seal would be covered by a metal panel; but the shuttle was not in flight at the moment, and the sensors were turned off.

Mulch climbed from his tunnel and reinged his jaw. This was precision work and he needed fine control of his teeth. Rubber was not a recommended part of a dwarf's diet, and so could not be swallowed. Half-digested rubber could seal up his insides as effectively as a barrel of glue.

It was an awkward bite. Difficult to get a grip. Mulch flattened his cheek against the battery rod, worming upward until his incisors could get some purchase on the seal. He bore down on the heavy rubber, rotating his jaw in small circles until his upper tooth broke through. Then he ground his teeth, enlarging the rent until there was a six-inch tear in the rubber. Now Mulch could get one side of his mouth into the gap. He tore off large chunks, careful to spit them out immediately.

In less than a minute Mulch had torn a foot-square hole. Just enough for him to squeeze through. Anyone unfamiliar with dwarfs would have bet money that Mulch would never squeeze his well-fed bulk through such a narrow aperture, but they would have lost their cash. Dwarfs have spent millennia escaping from cave-ins, and have developed the ability to squeeze through tighter holes than this one.

Mulch sucked in his gut and wiggled through the torn seal, headfirst. He was glad to be out of the faint, morning sunlight. Sun was another thing dwarfs did not like. After mere minutes in direct sunlight, a dwarf's skin would be redder than a boiled lobster's. He shinned along the battery rod into the shuttle's engine compartment. Most of the small space was taken up with flat batteries and a hydrogen generator. There was an access hatch overhead that led into the cargo bay. Light ropes ran the length of the compartment, giving off pale green light. Any radiation leak from the generator would show up purple. The reason that the light ropes were still working without power was that illumination was supplied by specially cultivated decaying algae. Not that Mulch knew any of this; he just knew that the light was very similar to the luminescence from dwarf spittle, and the familiarity made him relax. He relaxed a bit too much, as it happened, allowing a small squib of tunnel gas to escape through his bum-flap. Hopefully nobody would notice that. . . .

Maybe half a minute later, he heard Opal's voice from outside.

"Now, whoever is passing wind, please stop it, or I will devise a fitting punishment."

Oops, thought Mulch guiltily. In dwarf circles it is considered almost criminal to allow someone else to be blamed for your air bubbles. Through sheer force of habit, Mulch almost raised his hand and confessed, but luckily his instinct for self-preservation was stronger than his conscience.

Moments later the signal came. It was hard to miss. The explosion rocked the entire shuttle twenty degrees off center. It was time to make his move and trust Artemis when he said that it was almost impossible not to watch an explosion.

Mulch nudged the hatch open a crack with the crown of his head. The dwarf half expected someone to stamp on the hatch, but the cargo bay was empty. Mulch folded the hatch back and crept all the way into the small chamber. There was a lot here to interest him. Crates of ingots, Perspex boxes of human currency, and antique jewelry hanging from mannequins. Obviously Opal did not intend on being poor in her new role as a human. Mulch snagged a single diamond earring from a nearby bust. So Artemis had told him not to take anything. So what? One earring wouldn't slow him down.

Mulch popped the pigeon's egg-size diamond into his mouth and swallowed. He could pass that later when he was on his own. Until then it could lodge in his stomach wall, and it would come out shinier than it went in.

Another explosion bucked the floor beneath his feet, reminding Mulch to move on. He crossed to the bay door, which was slightly ajar. The next chamber was the passenger area, and it was just as plush as Holly had described. Mulch's lips rippled at the sight of fur-covered chairs. Repulsive. Beyond the passenger area was the cockpit. Opal and her two friends were clearly visible, staring intently out of the front windshield. They were making not a sound, and saying not a word. Just as Artemis had said.

Mulch dropped to his knees and crawled across the lounge's carpet. He was now completely exposed. If one of the pixies decided to turn around, he would be stranded in the center of the lounge with nothing but a smile to hide behind.

Just keep going and don't think about that, Mulch told himself. If Opal catches you, pretend you're lost or have amnesia, or just came out of a coma. Maybe she'll sympathize, give you some gold, and send you on your way. Yeah, right.

Something creaked slightly beneath Mulch's knee. The dwarf froze, but the pixies didn't react to the sound. Presumably that was the lid of the booty box. Opal's little hidey hole. Mulch crawled around the box. If there was one thing he didn't need, it was more creaks.

Two shaped charges lay on a chair, level with Mulch's nose. He couldn't believe it. Right there, less than a yard away. This was the one part of the plan that relied on luck. If one of the Brill brothers had the charge tucked under his arm or if there were more charges than he could carry, then they would have to ram the shuttle and hope to disable her. But here it was, almost begging to be stolen. When he was committing a robbery, Mulch often gave voices to the objects he was about to steal. This, he knew, would sound a little crazy to the rest of the world, but he spent a lot of time on his own and he needed someone to talk to.

Come on, Mister Handsome Dwarf, said one of the charges in a breathy falsetto. *I'm waiting. I don't like it here, you know. Please rescue me.*

Very well, Madame, said Mulch silently, taking the bag from inside his shirt. *I'll take you, but we're not going very far.*

Me, too, said the other charge. *I want to go, too.*

Don't worry, ladies. Where you're going, there's plenty of room for both of you.

When Mulch Diggums crept out through the torn seal a minute later, the charges were no longer on the chair. In their place was a small handheld communicator.

* * *

The three pixies sat quietly in the stealth shuttle's cockpit. One was concentrating on the transport craft hovering two hundred yards off their bows. The other two were concentrating on not passing wind, and not thinking about not passing wind.

The transport shuttle's side entrance opened, and something winked in the morning light as it tumbled earthward. Seconds later the something exploded, rocking the stealth shuttle on its suspension bags.

The Brill brothers gasped, and Opal cuffed them both on the ear.

Opal was not worried. They were searching. Shooting in the dark, or very close to it. Maybe in thirty minutes there would be enough light to see the ship with the naked eye, but until then they were blending very nicely with the surrounding countryside, thanks to a hull made from stealth ore and cam-foil. Fowl must have guessed where they were because of this chute's

proximity to the probe. But all he had was an approximation. Of course it would be delightful to blast them out of the air, but plasma bursts would light up Foaly's satellite scanners and paint a bull's eye on their hull.

She plucked a digi-pad and pen from the dash and scrawled a message on it.

Stay quiet and calm. Even if one of those charges hits us, it will not penetrate the hull.

Mervall took the pad. *Maybe we should leave. Mud Men will be coming.*

Opal wrote a response. *Dear Mervall, please don't start thinking; you will hurt your head. We wait until they leave. At this close range, they could actually hear our engines starting.*

Another explosion rocked the stealth shuttle. Opal felt a bead of sweat roll down her forehead. This was ridiculous: she didn't perspire, certainly not in front of the help. In five minutes the humans would come to investigate. It was their nature. So she would wait five minutes, then try to slip past the LEP shuttle, and if she couldn't slip past, then she would blast them out of the sky and take her chances with the supersonic shuttle that would no doubt come to investigate.

More grenades dropped from the LEP craft, but they were farther away now, and the shock waves barely caused a shudder in the stealth shuttle. This went on for two or three minutes without the remotest danger to Opal or the Brills, then suddenly the transport shuttle sealed its door and peeled off back down the chute.

"Hmm," said Opal. "Surprising."

"Maybe they ran out of ammunition," offered Merv, though he knew that Opal would punish him for offering an opinion.

"Is that what you think, Mervall? They ran out of explosives and so they decided just to let us go? Do you really imagine that to be true, you imbecilic excuse for a sentient being? Don't you have any frontal lobes?"

"I was just playing devil's advocate," mumbled Merv weakly.

Opal rose from her seat, waving a hand at each Brill brother. "Just shut up. I need to talk to myself for a minute." She paced the narrow cockpit. "What's going on here? They track us to the chute, then put on a big fireworks display, then leave. Just like that. Why? Why?"

She rubbed both temples with a knuckle. "Think." Suddenly Opal remembered something. "Last night. A shuttle was stolen in E1. We heard about it on the police band. Who stole it?"

Scant shrugged. "I dunno. Some dwarf. Is it important?"

"That's right. A dwarf. And wasn't there a dwarf involved in the Artemis Fowl siege? And weren't there rumors of the same dwarf helping Julius to break into Koboï labs?"

"Rumors. No actual evidence."

Opal turned on Scant. "Maybe that's because, unlike you, this dwarf is smart. Maybe he doesn't want to be caught." The pixie took a moment to connect the dots. "So they have a dwarf burglar, a shuttle, and explosives. Holly must know that those pathetic grenades can't penetrate our hull, so why drop them? Unless . . ."

The truth hit her like a physical blow in the stomach. "Oh no," she gasped. "Distraction. We sat here like fools watching the pretty lights. And all the time . . ."

She heaved Scant aside, rushing past him to the lounge.

"The charges," she shrieked. "Where are they?"

Scant went straight to the chair. "Don't worry, Miss Koboï, they're right—" He stopped, the sentence's final word stuck in his throat. "I, ah, they were right there. In the chair."

Opal picked up the small handheld radio. "They're toying with me. Tell me you put the

backup somewhere safe.”

“No,” said Scant miserably. “They were together.”

Merv pushed past him into the cargo bay. “The engine compartment is open.” He stuck his head through the hatch. His voice wafted up, muffled by the floor panels. “The battery rod seal has been ripped apart. And there are footprints. Someone came through here.”

Opal threw back her head and screamed. She held it for a long time for such a small individual.

Finally her breath ran out. “Follow the shuttle,” she gasped when her wind returned. “I modified those charges myself and they cannot be disarmed. We can still detonate. At the very least we will destroy my enemies.”

“Yes, Miss Koboi,” said Merv and Scant together.

“Don’t look at me,” howled Opal.

The Brill brothers fled to the cockpit, trying to simultaneously bow, look at their feet, not think anything dangerous, and above all, not pass wind.

* * *

Mulch was waiting at the rendezvous site when the LEP shuttle arrived. Butler opened the door and hauled the dwarf in by the collar.

“Did you get it?” asked Artemis anxiously.

Mulch passed him the bulging bag. “Right here. And before you ask, I left the radio.”

“So everything went according to plan?”

“Completely,” replied Mulch, neglecting to mention the diamond nestled in his stomach wall.

“Excellent,” said Artemis, striding past the dwarf to the cockpit.

“Go,” he shouted, thumping Holly’s headrest.

Holly already had the shuttle ticking over, and was holding it with the brake.

“We’re gone,” she said, releasing the brake and flooring the throttle. The LEP craft bolted from the rocky outcrop like a pebble from a catapult.

Artemis’s legs were dragged from the floor, flapping behind him like windsocks. The rest of him would have followed if he hadn’t held on to the headrest.

“How much time do we have?” asked Holly, through lips rippled by G-force.

Artemis pulled himself into the passenger seat. “Minutes. The orebody will hit a depth of one hundred and five miles in precisely one quarter of an hour. Opal will be after us any second.”

Holly shadowed the chute wall, spinning between two towers of rock. The lower portion of E7 was quite straight, but this stretch corkscrewed through the crust, following the cracks in the plates.

“Is this going to work, Artemis?” said Holly.

Artemis pondered the question. “I considered eight plans, and this was the best one. Even so, we have a sixty-four percent chance of success. The key is to keep Opal distracted so she doesn’t discover the truth. That’s up to you, Holly. Can you do it?”

Holly wrapped her fingers around the wheel. “Don’t worry. It’s not often I get a chance to do some fancy flying. Opal will be so busy trying to catch us that she won’t have time to consider anything else.”

Artemis looked out of the windshield. They were pointing straight down toward the center of the earth. Gravity fluctuated at this depth and speed, so they were alternately pinned to their chairs and straining to be free of their seat belts. The chute’s blackness enveloped them like

tar, except for the cone of light from the shuttle's headlamps. Gigantic rock formations darted in and out of the cone heading straight for their nose. Somehow Holly steered them through, without once tapping the brake.

On the plasma dash, the icon representing the gaseous anomaly that was Opal's ship inched across the screen.

"They're on to us," said Holly, catching the movement from the corner of one eye.

Artemis's stomach was knotted from flight nausea, anxiety, fatigue, and exhilaration. "Very well," he said, almost to himself. "The chase is on."

At the mouth of E7, Merv was at the wheel of the stealth shuttle. Scant was on instruments, and Opal was in charge of giving orders and general ranting.

"Do we have a signal from the charge?" she screeched from her chair.

Her voice is really getting annoying, thought Scant, but not too loudly. "No," he replied. "Nothing. Which means it must be in the other shuttle. Their shields must be blocking the charge's signal. We need to get closer, or I could send the detonation signal anyway; we might get lucky."

Opal's screech grew more strident. "No! We must not detonate before that shuttle reaches one hundred and five miles. If we do, the orebody will not change course. What about this stupid communicator? Anything from that?"

"Negative," said Scant. "If there's another one, it must be switched off."

"We could always return to Zito's compound," said Merv. "We have a dozen more charges there."

Opal leaned forward in her seat, punching Merv's shoulders with her tiny fists. "Idiot. Moron. Half-wit. Are you in some kind of stupidity competition? Is that it? If we return to Zito's, the orebody will be too deep by the time we return. Not to mention the fact that Captain Short will present the LEP with her version of events and they will have to investigate, at the very least. We must get closer and we must detonate. Even if we miss the probe window, at least we destroy any witnesses against me."

The stealth shuttle had proximity sensors linked into the navigating software, which meant that Opal and company did not have to worry about colliding with the chute wall or stalactites.

"How long before we're in detonation range?" Opal barked. To be honest, it was more of a yip.

Merv did some quick calculations. "Three minutes. No more."

"How deep will they be at that point?"

A few more sums. "One hundred and fifty-five miles."

Opal pinched her nose. "It could work. Presuming they have both charges, the resulting explosion, even if not directed as we planned, may be enough to blow a crack in the wall. It's our only option. If it fails, at least we have time to regroup. As soon as they hit one hundred and five, send the detonate signal. Send it continuously. We may get lucky."

Merv flipped a plastic safety cover off the DETONATE button. Only minutes to go.

Artemis's insides were trying to force their way out his throat. "This heap needs new gyroscopes," he said.

Holly barely nodded, too busy concentrating on a particularly tricky series of jinks and loops in the chute.

Artemis consulted the dashboard's readout. "We're at a depth of one hundred and five now. Opal will be trying to detonate. She's closing fast."

Mulch stuck his head through from the passenger section. "Is all this jiggling about really necessary? I've had a lot to eat recently."

"Nearly there," said Artemis. "The ride is just about over. Tell Butler to open the bag."

"Okay. Are you sure Opal will do what she's supposed to?"

Artemis smiled reassuringly. "Of course I am. It's human nature, and Opal is a human now, remember? Now, Holly. Pull over."

Mervall tapped the readout. "You're not going to believe this, Op . . . Miss Koboi."

The merest hint of a smile flickered across Opal's lips. "Don't tell me. They have stopped."

Merv shook his head, astounded. "Yes, they are hovering at one hundred and twenty-five. Why would they do that?"

"There's no point trying to explain it, Mervall. Just keep sending the detonation signal, but slow us down. I don't want to be too close when we get a connection."

She drummed her nails on the handheld communicator left behind by the dwarf. Any second now.

A red call light flashed on the communicator, accompanied by a slight vibration. Opal smiled, flipping open the walkie-talkie's screen.

Artemis's pale face filled the tiny screen. He was trying to smile, but it was obviously forced. "Opal, I am giving you one chance to surrender. We have disarmed your charges and the LEP is on its way. It would be better for you to turn yourself over to Captain Short than shoot it out with an armed LEP ship."

Opal clapped her hands. "Bravo, Master Fowl, what a wonderful fiction. Now, why don't I tell you the real truth. You have realized that the charges cannot be disarmed. The mere fact that I can receive your communication's signal means that my detonation signal will soon penetrate your shields. You cannot simply jettison the explosives, or I will set them off in the chute, exactly as I had originally planned. Then I will simply fire a few heat seekers at your craft. And if you attempt further flight, then I will follow and penetrate your shields before you clear the parallel stretch. You are not in communication with the LEP. If you were, we would have picked up your broadcast. So your only alternative is this pathetic bluff. And it is pathetic. You are obviously attempting to stall me until the orebody passes your depth."

"So you refuse to surrender?"

Opal pretended to think about it, tapping her chin with a manicured nail. "Why, yes. I think I will fight on, against all odds. And by the way, please don't look directly at the screen: it's bad for my skin."

Artemis sighed dramatically. "Well, if we have to go, at least we'll go on full stomachs."

This was an unusually cavalier comment to make with seconds to live, even for a human. "Full stomachs?"

"Yes," said Artemis. "Mulch took something else from your shuttle."

He picked up a small chocolate-covered ball and wiggled it before the screen.

"My truffles?" gasped Opal. "You took them. That's just mean."

Artemis popped the treat into his mouth and chewed slowly. "They really are divine. I can see why you missed them in the institute. We're really going to have to work hard to eat all we took before you blow us to smithereens."

Opal hissed, catlike. "Killing you will be so easy." She turned to Merv. "Do we have a signal yet?"

"Nothing, Miss Koboi. But soon. If we have communications, it can't be long now."

Holly squeezed her head into the viewfinder. One cheek was swollen with truffles. “They really melt in the mouth, Opal. The condemned crew’s final meal.”

Opal actually poked the screen with her nail. “You survived twice, Short. You won’t do it again, I guarantee it.”

Holly laughed. “You should see Mulch. He’s shoveling those truffles down his gullet.”

Opal was livid. “Any signal?” Even now, with certain destruction only moments away, they were still mocking her.

“Not yet. Soon.”

“Keep trying. Keep your finger on that button.”

Opal unstrapped herself and strode through to the lounge. The dwarf couldn’t have carried all the truffles *and* the explosives. Surely not. She had been so looking forward to a handful of the heavenly chocolate once Haven was destroyed.

She knelt on the carpet, worming her hand underneath the seam to the hidden catch. It popped beneath her fingers, and the booty box’s lid slid up and back.

There was not a single truffle left in the box. Instead there were two shaped charges. For a moment Opal could not understand what she was seeing. Then it became terrifyingly clear. Artemis had not stolen the charges; he had simply told the dwarf to move them. Once in the booty box they could not be detected or detonated, as long as the lid was sealed. She had opened the box herself. Artemis had goaded her into sealing her own fate.

The blood drained from Opal’s face. “Mervall,” she screamed. “The detonation signal!”

“Don’t worry, Miss Koboï,” the pixie shouted from the cockpit. “We just got contact. Nothing can stop it now.”

Green countdown clocks activated on both charges and began counting back from twenty. A standard mining fuse.

Opal lurched into the cockpit. She had been tricked.

Duped. Now the charges would detonate uselessly at seventy-five miles, well above the parallel stretch. Of course her own shuttle would be destroyed and she would be left stranded, ready to be scooped up by the LEP. At least that was the theory. But Opal Koboï never left herself without options.

She strapped herself into a seat in the cockpit.

“I advise you to strap in,” she said curtly to the Brill brothers. “You have failed me. Enjoy prison.”

Merv and Scant barely had time to buckle up before Opal activated the ejector gel-pods under their seats. They were immediately immersed in a bubble of amber impact-gel and ejected through panels that had opened in the hull.

The impact-gel bubbles had no power source and relied on the initial gas propulsion to get them out of harm’s way. The gel was fireproof, blast resistant, and contained enough oxygen for thirty minutes of shallow breathing. Merv and Scant were catapulted through black space until they came into contact with the chute wall. The gel stuck to the rocky surface, leaving the Brill brothers stranded thousands of miles from home.

Opal, meanwhile, was rapidly keying codes into the shuttle’s computer. She had less than ten seconds left to complete her final act of aggression. Artemis Fowl may have beaten her this time, but he wouldn’t live to gloat about it.

Opal expertly activated and launched two heat-seeking plasma rockets from the nose tubes, then launched her own escape pod. No plasma-gel for Opal Koboï. She had, of course, included a luxury pod in the ship’s design. Just one, though; no need for the help to travel in

comfort. In fact, Opal didn't care much what happened to the Brill brothers, one way or the other. They were of no further use to her.

She opened the throttles wide, ignoring safety regulations. After all, who cared if she scorched the shuttle's hull. It was about to get a lot more than just scorched. The pod streaked toward the surface at over five hundred miles per hour. Pretty fast, but not fast enough to completely escape the shock wave from the two shaped charges.

The stealth shuttle exploded in a flash of multicolored light. Holly pulled the LEP shuttle close to the wall to avoid falling debris. After the shock waves had passed, the shuttle's occupants waited in silence for the computer to run a scan on the stretch of chute above them. Eventually three red dots appeared on the 3-D representation of the chute. Two were static, the other was moving rapidly toward the surface.

"They made it," sighed Artemis. "I have no doubt that the moving dot is Opal. We should pick her up."

"We should," said Holly, not looking as happy as one would expect. "But we won't."

Artemis picked up on Holly's tone. "Why not? What's wrong?"

"That's wrong," said Holly, pointing to the screen. Two more dots had appeared on the screen and were moving toward them at extreme speed. The computer identified the dots as missiles, and quickly ran a match in its database.

"Heat-seeking plasma rockets. Locked on to our engines."

Mulch shook his head. "That Koboï is a bitter little pixie. She couldn't let it go."

Artemis stared at the screen as if he could destroy the missiles through concentration. "I should have anticipated this."

Butler poked his massive head past his charge's shoulders. "Do you have any hot waffle to draw the missiles away?"

"This is a transport shuttle," replied Holly. "We were lucky to have shields."

"The missiles are coming after our heat signature?"

"Yes," said Holly, hoping there was an idea on the way.

"Is there any way to significantly alter that signature?"

An option occurred to Holly then. It was so extreme that she didn't bother running it past the shuttle's other occupants.

"There is one way," she said, and turned off the engines.

The shuttle dropped like a rock through the chute. Holly tried to maneuver using the flaps, but without propulsion it was like trying to steer an anchor.

There was no time for fear or panic. There was only time to hang on to something and try to keep her last meal inside her body.

Holly gritted her teeth, swallowing the panic that was trying to claw its way out, and fought the steering wheel. If she could keep the flaps centered, then they shouldn't collide with the chute walls. At least this way, they had a chance.

She flicked her eyes toward the readouts. The core temperature was dropping, but would it be quickly enough? This section of the chute was reasonably straight, but there was a kink coming up in thirty-one miles, and they would crash into it like a fly hitting an elephant.

Butler crawled upward toward the rear of the ship. On the way he snagged two fire extinguishers and popped their pins. He tossed the extinguishers into the engine room and closed the door. Through the hatch, he could see the extinguishers cartwheeling, covering the engine with freezing foam.

The engine temperature dropped another notch.

The missiles were closer now, and gaining.

Holly opened all the vents wide, flooding the shuttle with cool air. Another notch toward green on the temperature readout.

“Come on,” she said through rippling lips. “A few more degrees.”

They hurtled down and down, spinning into blackness. Little by little the ship was drifting to starboard. Soon it would smash into the kink that rose to meet them. Holly’s finger hovered over the ignition. She would wait until the last possible moment.

The engines cooled even further. They were efficient energy-saving units. When they were not in use, they quickly funneled excess heat to the life-support batteries. But still the missiles held their course.

The kink in the chute wall appeared in their headlights. It was bigger than an average mountain and composed of hard, unforgiving rock. If the shuttle crashed, it would crumple like a tin can.

Artemis squeezed words from between his lips. “Not working. Engines.”

“Wait,” Holly replied.

The flaps were vibrating now, and the shuttle went into a tumble. They could see the heat seekers roaring up behind them, then in front of them, then behind them again.

They were close to the rock now. Too close. If Holly delayed even one more second, she would not have sufficient room to maneuver. She punched the ignition, veering to port at the last millisecond. The bow plates sent up an arc of sparks as they scraped along the rocky outcrop. Then they were free, zooming into the black void. That is, if you can count being pursued by two heat seekers as being free.

The engine temperature was still dropping and would be for maybe half a minute while the turbines heated up. Would it be enough? Holly punched the rear camera view up on the front screen. The rockets were still coming. Unrelenting. Purple fuel burning in their wake. Three seconds to impact. Then two.

Then they lost contact, veering away from their target. One went over the top, the other under the keel.

“It worked,” sighed Artemis, releasing a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“Well done, soldier,” grinned Butler, ruffling Holly’s hair.

Mulch poked his head through from the passenger area. His face was slightly green. “I had a little accident,” he said. No one inquired further.

“Let’s not celebrate just yet,” said Holly, checking her instruments. “Those missiles should have detonated against the chute wall, but they didn’t. I can only think of one reason why they wouldn’t keep traveling in a straight line.”

“If they acquired another target,” offered Butler.

A red dot appeared on the plasma screen. The two missiles were headed directly for it.

“Exactly. That’s an LEP supersonic attack shuttle, and as far as they’re concerned, we’ve just opened fire on them.”

* * *

Major Trouble Kelp was behind the wheel of the LEP attack shuttle. The craft was traveling at more than three times the speed of sound, booming along the chute like a silver needle. Supersonic flights were very rarely cleared, as they could cause cave-ins and, in rare cases, be detected by human seismographic equipment.

The shuttle’s interior was filled with impact-gel to dampen the otherwise bone-breaking

vibration. Major Kelp was suspended in the gel in a modified pilot's suit. The ship's controls were connected directly to his gloves, and the video ran in to his helmet.

Foaly was in constant contact from Police Plaza.

"Be advised that the stolen shuttle is back in the chute," he informed Trouble. "It's hovering at one hundred and twenty-five miles."

"I have it," said Trouble, locating the dot on his radar. He felt his heart race. There was a chance that Holly was alive and aboard that shuttle. And if that were true, he would do whatever it took to bring her home safely.

A sunburst of white, yellow, and orange flared on his scopes.

"We have an explosion of some kind. Was it the stolen shuttle?"

"No, Trouble. It came from nowhere. There was nothing there. Watch out for debris."

The screen was streaked with dozens of jagged yellow lines, as hot metal shards plummeted toward the center of the earth. Trouble activated the nose lasers, ready for anything that might head his way. It was unlikely that his vessel would be threatened; the chute was wider than the average city at this depth. The debris from the explosion would not spread more than half a mile. He had plenty of time to steer himself out of harm's way.

Unless some of the debris followed him. Two of the yellow streaks were veering unnaturally in his direction. The onboard computer ran a scan. Both items had propulsion and guidance systems. Missiles.

"I am under fire," he said into his microphone. "Two missiles incoming."

Had Holly fired on him? Was it true what Sool said? Had she really gone bad?

Trouble reached into the air and tapped a virtual screen. He touched the representations for both missiles, targeting them for destruction. As soon as they came into range, the computer would hit them with a beam of laser fire. Trouble steered into the middle of the chute so that the lasers would have the longest possible line of fire. Lasers were only any good in a straight line.

Three minutes later, the missiles powered around the bend in the chute. Trouble barely spared them a glance, and the computer loosed two quick bursts, dispatching the missiles efficiently. Major Kelp flew straight through the shock wave, insulated by layers of impact-gel.

Another screen opened in his visor. It was the newly promoted Commander Ark Sool. "Major, you are authorized to return fire. Use all necessary force."

Trouble scowled. "But, Commander, Holly may be on board."

Sool raised a hand, silencing all objections. "Captain Short has made her allegiances clear. Fire at will."

Foaly could not remain silent. "Hold your fire, Trouble. You know Holly isn't behind all of this. Somehow Opal Koboi fired those missiles."

Sool pounded the desk. "How can you be so blind to the truth, donkey boy? What does Short have to do to convince you she's a traitor? Send you an e-mail? She has murdered her commander, allied herself with a felon, and fired on an LEP shuttle. Blast her out of the air."

"No!" insisted Foaly. "It sounds bad, I grant you. But there must be another explanation. Just give Holly a chance to tell us what it is."

Sool was apoplectic. "Shut up, Foaly! What are you doing giving tactical orders? You are a civilian, now get off the line."

"Trouble, listen to me," began Foaly, but that was all he managed to say before Sool cut him off.

"Now," said the commander, calming himself. "You have your orders. Fire on that shuttle."

The stolen shuttle was actually in view now. Trouble magnified its image in his visor and immediately noticed three things. First, the shuttle's communications mast was missing. Second, this was a transport shuttle and not rigged for missiles, and third, he could actually see Holly Short in the cockpit, her face drawn and defiant.

"Commander Sool," he said. "I think we have some extenuating circumstances here."

"I said fire!" screeched Sool. "You will obey me."

"Yes, sir," said Trouble, and fired.

Holly had watched the radar screen, following Opal's missiles through unblinking eyes. Her fingers had gripped the steering wheel until the rubber squeaked. She did not relax until the needle-like attack shuttle destroyed the missiles and coasted through the wreckage.

"No problem," she said, smiling bright eyed at the rest of the crew.

"Not for him," said Artemis. "But perhaps for us."

The attack shuttle hovered off their port bow, sleek and deadly, bathing them with a dozen spotlights. Holly squinted into the pale light, trying to see who was in the captain's chair. A tube opened and a metallic cone nosed out.

"That's not good," said Mulch. "They're going to fire at us."

But strangely, Holly smiled. It is good, she thought. Someone down there likes me.

The communications spike traveled the short distance between the two shuttles, burying itself in the stolen craft's hull. A quick-drying sealant erupted from nozzles at the base of the spike, sealing the breach, and the nose cone unscrewed itself and dropped to the floor with a clang. Underneath was a conical speaker.

Trouble Kelp's voice filled the room. "Captain Short, I have orders to blow you out of the air. Orders that I'd just as soon disobey. So start talking, and give me enough information to save both our careers."

So Holly talked. She gave Trouble the condensed version. How this entire affair was orchestrated by Opal, and how they would pick her up if they searched the chute.

"That's enough to keep you alive, for now," said Trouble. "Though, officially, you and any other shuttle occupants are under arrest until we find Opal Koboi."

Artemis cleared his throat. "Excuse me. I don't believe you have any jurisdiction over humans. It would be illegal to arrest me or my associate."

Trouble sighed. Over the speaker it sounded like a rasp of sandpaper. "Let me guess: Artemis Fowl, right? I should have known. You people are becoming quite the team. Well, let's say you are a guest of the LEP, if that makes you any happier. Now, a Retrieval squad is in the chute. They will take care of Opal and her associates. You follow me back to Haven."

Holly wanted to object. She wanted to catch Opal herself. She wanted the personal pleasure of tossing the poisonous pixie into an actual jail cell. And then throw away the key. But their position was precarious enough as it was, so for once she decided to follow orders.

CHAPTER 11

A LAST GOOD-BYE

E7, Haven City

Once they reached Haven, a squad of LEP foot soldiers boarded the shuttle to secure the prisoners. The police swaggered on board, barking orders. Then they saw Butler, and their cockiness evaporated like rainwater from a hot highway. They had been told that the human was

big. But this was more than big. This was monstrous. Mountainous.

Butler smiled apologetically. “Don’t worry, little fairies. I have this effect on most humans too.”

The police breathed a collective sigh of relief when Butler agreed to go quietly. They could possibly have subdued him if he had put up a fight, but then the massive Mud Man might have fallen on someone.

The detainees were housed in the shuttleport’s executive lounge, evicting several grumbling lawyers and businessfairies. It was all very civil: good food, clean clothes (not for Butler), and entertainment centers. But they were under guard, nevertheless.

Half an hour later, Foaly burst in to the lounge.

“Holly!” he said, wrapping a hairy arm around the elf. “I am so happy that you’re alive.”

“Me too, Foaly.” Holly grinned.

“A little hello wouldn’t hurt,” said Mulch sulkily. “How are you, Mulch? Long time no see, Mulch. Here’s your medal, Mulch.”

“Oh, all right,” said Foaly, wrapping the other hairy arm around the equally hairy dwarf. “Nice to see you too, Mulch, even if you did sink one of my subs. And no, no medal.”

“Because of the sub,” argued Mulch. “If I hadn’t done it, your bones would be buried under a hundred million tons of molten iron right now.”

“Good point,” noted the centaur. “I’ll mention it at your hearing.” He turned to Artemis. “I see you managed to cheat the mind wipe, Artemis.”

Artemis smiled. “A good thing for all of us.”

“Indeed. I’ll never make the mistake of trying to wipe you again.” He took Artemis’s hand and shook it warmly. “You’ve been a friend to the People. You too, Butler.”

The bodyguard was hunched on a sofa, elbows on knees. “You can repay me by building a room I can stand up in.”

“I’m sorry about this,” said Foaly apologetically. “We don’t have rooms for people your size. Sool wants you all kept here until your story can be verified.”

“How are things going?” asked Holly.

Foaly pulled a file from inside his shirt. “I’m not actually supposed to be here, but I thought you’d like an update.”

They crowded around a table while Foaly laid out the reports.

“We found the Brill brothers on the chute wall. They’re singing like stinkworms—so much for loyalty to your employer. Forensics have collected enough pieces of the stealth shuttle to prove its existence.”

Holly clapped her hands. “That’s it, then.”

“It’s not airtight,” corrected Artemis. “Without Opal, we could still be responsible for everything. The Brills could be lying to protect us. Do you have her?”

Foaly clenched his fists. “Well, yes and no. Her escape pod was ruptured from the blast, so we could trace it. But by the time we reached the crash-down site on the surface, she had disappeared. We ran a thermal on the area and isolated Opal’s footprints. We followed them to a small rustic homestead in the wine region near Bari. We can actually see her on satellite, but an insertion is going to take time to organize. She’s ours, and we will get her. But it may take a week.”

Holly’s face was dark with rage. “She’d better enjoy that week, because it will be the best of the rest of her life.”

Near Bari, Italy

Opal Koboi's craft limped to the surface, leaking plasma gouts through its cracked generator. Opal was well aware that this plasma was as good as a trail of arrows for Foaly. She must ditch the craft as soon as possible and find somewhere to lay low until she could access some of her funds.

She cleared the shuttleport and made it nearly ten miles across country before her engines seized, utterly forcing her to ditch in a vineyard. When she clambered from the pod, Opal found a tall tanned woman of perhaps forty waiting for her with a shovel and a furious expression on her face.

"These are my vines," said the woman in Italian. "The vines are my life. Who are you to crash here in your little airplane and destroy everything I have?"

Opal thought fast. "Where is your family?" she asked. "Your husband?"

The woman blew a strand of hair from her eye. "No family. No husband. I work the vines alone. I'm the last in the line. These vines mean more to me than my life, and certainly more to me than yours."

"You're not alone," said Opal, turning on the hypnotic fairy *mesmer*. "You have me now. I am your daughter, Belinda."

Why not? she reasoned. If it worked once . . .

"Bel-inda," said the woman slowly. "I have a daughter?"

"That's right," agreed Opal. "Belinda. Remember? We work these vines together. I help make the wine."

"You help me?"

Opal scowled. Humans never got anything the first time.

"Yes," she said, barely concealing her impatience. "I help you. I work beside you."

The woman's eyes cleared suddenly. "Belinda. What are you doing standing there? Get a shovel and clean up this mess. When you finish here you must prepare dinner."

Opal's heart skipped a beat. Manual labor? Not likely. Other people did that sort of thing.

"On second thought," she said, pushing the *mesmer* as hard as she could, "I am your pampered daughter Belinda. You never allow me to do any work in case it roughens my hands. You're saving me for a rich husband." That should take care of it. She would hide out with this woman for a few hours, and then escape to the city.

But a surprise was coming Opal's way. "That's my Belinda," said the woman. "Always dreaming. Now take this shovel, girl, or you'll go to bed hungry."

Opal's cheeks flushed red. "Didn't you hear me, crone?"

I do not do physical work. You will serve me. That is your purpose in life."

The Italian lady advanced on her tiny daughter. "Now, listen here, Belinda. I'm trying not to hear these poisonous words coming out of your mouth, but it is difficult. We both work the vines; that is the way it has always been. Now, take the shovel, or I will lock you in your room with a hundred potatoes to peel and none to eat."

Opal was dumbstruck. She could not understand what was happening. Even strong-minded humans were putty before the *mesmer*. What was happening here?

The simple truth was that Opal had been too clever for her own good. By placing a human pituitary gland in her own skull, she had effectively humanized herself. Gradually the human growth hormone was overpowering the magic in her system. It was Opal's bad fortune that she had used her last drop of magic to convince this woman that she was her daughter. Now she was without magic, and a virtual prisoner in the Italian lady's vineyard. And what's more, she was being forced to work, and that was even worse than being in a coma.

“Hurry!” shouted the woman. “There is rain in the forecast, and we have a lot to do.”

Opal took the shovel, resting the blade on the dry earth. It was taller than she was, and its handle was pitted and worn.

“What should I do with this shovel?”

“Crack the earth with the blade, then dig an irrigation trench between these two frames. And after dinner, I need you to hand wash some of the laundry that I have taken in this week. It’s Carmine’s, and you know what his washing is like.” The lady grimaced, leaving Opal in no doubt as to the state of this person Carmine’s clothing.

The Italian lady picked up a second shovel and began to dig beside Opal.

“Don’t frown so, Belinda. Work is good for the character. After a few more years, you will see that.”

Opal swung the shovel, dealing the earth a pathetic blow that barely raised a sliver of clay. Already her hands were sore from holding the tool. In an hour she would be a mass of aches and blisters. Maybe the LEP would come and take her away.

Her wish was to be granted, but not until a week later, by which time her nails were cracked and brown, and her skin was rough with welts. She had peeled countless potatoes and waited on her new mother, hand and foot. Opal was also horrified to discover that her adopted parent kept pigs, and that cleaning out the sty was another one of her seemingly endless duties. By the time the LEP Retrieval team came for her, she was almost happy to see them.

E7, Haven City

Julius Root’s recycling ceremony was held the day after Artemis and Holly arrived in Haven City. All the brass turned up to the commitment ceremony. All the brass, but not Captain Holly Short. Commander Sool refused to allow her to attend the commitment, even under armed guard. The Tribunal investigating the case had not made its decision yet, and until it did, Holly was a suspect in a murder investigation.

So Holly sat in the executive lounge watching the commitment ceremony on the big screen. Of all the things Sool had done to her, this was the worst. Julius Root had been her closest friend, and here she was watching his recycling on a screen while all the higher-ups attended, looking sad for the cameras.

She covered her face with her hands when they lowered an empty casket into the ornate decomposition vat. After six months, his bone and tissue would have been completely broken down and his remains would be used to nourish the earth.

Tears leaked out between Holly’s fingers, flowing over her hands.

Artemis sat beside her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Julius would have been proud of you. Haven is here today because of what you did.”

Holly sniffed. “Maybe. Maybe if I had been a little smarter, Julius would be here today, too.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. I have been thinking about it and there was no way out of that chute. Not without prior knowledge.”

Holly lowered her hands. “Thanks, Artemis. That’s a nice thing to say. You’re not going soft, are you?”

Artemis was genuinely puzzled. “I honestly don’t know. Half of me wants to be a criminal, and the other half wants to be a normal teenager. I feel like I have two conflicting personalities and a head full of memories that aren’t really mine yet. It’s a strange feeling, not to know who you are exactly.”

“Don’t worry, Mud Boy,” said Holly. “I’ll keep a close eye on you to make sure you stay

on the straight and narrow.”

“I have two parents and a bodyguard already trying to do that.”

“Well then, maybe it’s time to let them.”

The lounge’s doors slid open, and Foaly clopped in excitedly, followed by Commander Sool and a couple of flunkies. Sool was obviously not as thrilled to be in the room as the centaur, and had brought the extra officers along just in case Butler got agitated.

Foaly grabbed Holly by the shoulders. “You’re clear.” He beamed. “The Tribunal voted seven to one in your favor.”

Holly scowled at Sool. “Let me guess who was the ‘one.’”

Sool bristled. “I am still your superior officer, Short. I want to see that reflected in your attitude. You may have escaped this charge, but I will be watching you like a hawk from now on.”

Mulch clicked his fingers in front of Foaly’s face. “Hey, ponyboy. Over here. What about me? Am I a free dwarf?”

“Well, the Tribunal decided to go after you for the grand theft auto.”

“What?” spluttered Mulch. “After I saved the entire city!”

“But,” continued Foaly, “considering the time already served for an illegal search, they’re prepared to call it even. No medal, I’m sorry to say.”

Mulch slapped the centaur’s haunch. “You couldn’t just say that, could you? You had to draw it out.”

Holly had not stopped scowling at Sool. “Let me tell you what Julius told me shortly before he died,” she said.

“Please do,” said Sool, his words dripping with sarcasm. “I find everything you say fascinating.”

“Julius told me, more or less, that my job was to serve the People, and that I should do that any way I could.”

“Smart fairy. I do hope you intend to honor those words.”

Holly ripped the LEP badge from her shoulder. “I do. With you looking over my shoulder on every shift, I won’t be able to help anyone, so I’ve decided to go it alone.” She tossed the badge on the table. “I quit.”

Sool chuckled. “If this is a bluff it won’t work. I’ll be glad to see the back of you.”

“Holly, don’t do this,” pleaded Foaly. “The force needs you. I need you.”

Holly patted his flank. “They accused me of murdering Julius. How can I stay? Don’t worry, old friend. I won’t be far away.” She nodded at Mulch. “Are you coming?”

“What, me?”

Holly grinned. “You’re a free dwarf now, and every private detective needs a partner. Someone with underworld connections.”

Mulch’s chest swelled. “Mulch Diggums, private detective. I like that. Hey, I’m not a sidekick, am I? Because the sidekick always gets it.”

“No. You’re a full-fledged partner. Whatever we make, we split.”

Holly turned to Artemis next. “We did it again, Mud Boy. We saved the world, or at least stopped two worlds colliding.”

Artemis nodded. “It doesn’t get any easier. Maybe someone else should take a turn.”

Holly punched him playfully in the arm. “Who else has our style?” Then she leaned in and whispered, “I’ll be in touch. Maybe you might be interested in some consultancy work?”

Artemis cocked one brow and gave a slight nod. It was all the answer she needed.

Butler usually stood to say good-bye, but in this instance, he had to make do with kneeling.

Holly was barely visible inside his hug.

“Until the next crisis,” she said.

“Or maybe you could just visit,” he replied.

“Getting a visa will be more difficult now that I’m a civilian.”

“You’re sure about this?”

Holly frowned. “No. I’m torn.” She nodded at Artemis. “But who isn’t?”

Artemis treated Sool to his most scornful gaze. “Congratulations, Commander, you have managed to alienate the LEP’s finest officer.”

“Listen here, human,” began Sool, but Butler growled and the words withered in the commander’s throat. The gnome stepped quickly behind the larger of his officers. “Send them home. Now.”

The officers drew their sidearms, aimed, and fired. A tranquilizer pellet stuck to Artemis’s neck, dissolving instantly. The officers hit Butler with four, not taking any chances.

Artemis could hear Holly protesting as his vision blurred like an Impressionist painting. Like *The Fairy Thief*.

“There’s no need for that, Sool,” she said, catching Artemis’s elbow. “They’ve seen the chute already. You could have returned them conscious.”

Sool’s voice sounded as though he were speaking from the bottom of a well. “I’m not taking any chances, Captain, I mean, *Miss Short*. Humans are violent creatures by nature, especially when they are being transported.”

Artemis felt Holly’s hand on his chest. Under his jacket, she slipped something into his pocket. But he couldn’t ask what, because his tongue would not obey him. All he could do with his mouth was breathe. He heard a thump behind him.

Butler’s gone, he concluded. Just me left.

And then he was gone too.

Fowl Manor

Artemis came to gradually. He felt well and rested, and all his memories were in place. Then again, maybe they weren’t. How would he know?

He opened his eyes and saw the fresco on the ceiling above. He was back in his own room.

Artemis did not move for several moments. It wasn’t that he couldn’t move, it was just that lying here like this seemed utterly luxurious. There were no pixies after him, or trolls homing in on his scent, or fairy tribunals judging him. He could lie here and simply think. His favorite occupation.

Artemis Fowl had a big decision to make: which way would his life go from here? The decision was his. He could not blame circumstances or peer pressure. He was his own person, and intelligent enough to realize it.

The solitary life of crime no longer appealed to him as completely as it had. He had no desire to create victims. Yet there was still something about the thrill of executing a brilliant plan that attracted him. Maybe there was a way to combine his criminal genius with his newfound morals. Some people deserved to be stolen from. He could be like a modern-day Robin Hood: steal from the rich and give to the poor. Well, maybe just steal from the rich. One step at a time.

Something vibrated in his jacket pocket. Artemis reached in and pulled out a fairy communicator. One of the pair they had planted in Opal Koboï’s shuttle. Artemis had a vague

memory of Holly sliding something into his pocket just before he passed out. She obviously wanted to stay in touch.

Artemis stood, opening the device, and Holly's smiling face appeared on the screen.

"You got home safely, then. Sorry about the sedatives. Sool is a pig."

"Forget about it. No harm done."

"You have changed. Once upon a time, Artemis Fowl would have vowed revenge."

"Once upon a time."

Holly glanced around her. "Listen, I can't stay on long. I had to bolt on a pirate booster to this thing just to get a signal. This call is costing me a fortune. I need a favor."

Artemis groaned. "No one ever calls me just to say hello."

"Next time. I promise."

"I'll hold you to it. What's the favor?"

"Mulch and I have our first client. He's an art dealer who's had a picture stolen. Frankly, I'm flummoxed, so I thought I'd ask an expert."

Artemis smiled. "I suppose I do have some expertise in the area of stolen art. Tell me what happened."

"The thing is, there's no way in or out of this exhibit without detection. The painting is just gone. Not even warlocks have that kind of magic."

Artemis heard footsteps on the stairs. "Hang on a second, Holly. Someone's coming."

Butler burst in the door, pistol drawn. "I just woke up," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," said Artemis. "You can put that away."

"I was half hoping Sool was still here so I could scare him a little." Butler crossed to the window and pulled aside the net curtains. "There's a car coming up the avenue. It's your parents back from the spa in Westmeath. We'd better get our stories straight. Why did we come home from Germany?"

Artemis thought quickly. "Let's just say I felt homesick. I missed being my parents' son. That's true enough."

Butler smiled. "I like that excuse. I hope you won't need to use it again."

"I don't intend to."

Butler held out a rolled-up canvas. "And what about this? Have you decided what you should do with it?"

Artemis took *The Fairy Thief* and spread it on the bed before him. It really was beautiful. "Yes, old friend. I have decided to do what I should do. Now, can you stall my parents at the door; I need to take this call."

Butler nodded, running down the stairs three at a time.

Artemis returned to the communicator. "Now, Holly, about your little problem. Have you considered the fact that the picture you seek may still be in the room, and our thief may have simply moved it?"

"That's the first thing I thought of. Come on, Artemis, you're supposed to be a genius. Use your brain."

Artemis scratched his chin. He was finding it difficult to concentrate. He heard tires crunching on the drive, and then his mother's voice laughing as she climbed from the car.

"Arty?" she called. "Come down. We need to see you."

"Come down, Arty boy," shouted his father. "Welcome us home."

Artemis found that he was smiling. "Holly, can you call me back later? I'm busy right now."

Holly tried to scowl. “Okay. Five hours, and you’d better have some suggestions for me.”
“Don’t worry, I will. And also my consultant’s bill.”
“Some things never change,” said Holly, and closed the link.
Artemis quickly locked the communicator in his room safe, then ran to the stairs.
His mother was at the bottom of the steps, and her arms were open wide.

EPILOGUE

An Article from *The Irish Times*, by Eugene Driscoll, Culture Correspondent

Last week the art world was left reeling following the discovery of a lost painting by Pascal Hervé, the French Impres-sionist master. The rumored recovery of *The Fairy Thief* (oil on canvas) was confirmed when the painting was sent to the Louvre Museum in Paris. Someone, presumably an art lover, actually used the regular mail service to post the priceless masterpiece to the curator. The authenticity of the work has been confirmed by six independent experts.

A spokesman for the Louvre has stated that the picture will be exhibited within the next month. So, for the first time in almost a century, everyday art lovers will be able to enjoy Hervé’s masterpiece.

But perhaps the most tantalizing part of this whole affair is the typed note that came with *The Fairy Thief*. The note read simply “More to follow.”

Is someone out there reclaiming lost or stolen masters for the people? If so, collectors beware. No secret vault is safe. This correspondent waits with bated breath. *More to follow*. Art lovers all over the world certainly hope so!

DON'T MISS THE NEXT
THRILLING ADVENTURE IN THE
ARTEMIS FOWL SERIES



THE LOST
COLONY

Casa Milà was an early twentieth-century dwelling designed by the Spanish art nouveau architect Antoni Gaudí. The façade consisted of curved walls and balconies topped by twisted ironworks. The walkway outside the building was thronged with tourists lining up for an afternoon tour of the spectacular house.

“Will we recognize our visitor among all these people? Are you sure that he is not already here? Watching us?”

Artemis smiled, his eyes glittering. “Believe me, he is not here. If he were, there would be a lot of screaming.”

Butler scowled. Once, just once, he would like to get all the facts before they boarded the jet. But that wasn't the way Artemis worked. To the young Irish genius, the *reveal* was the most important part of his schemes.

“At least tell me if our contact will be armed.”

“I doubt it,” said Artemis. “And even if he is, he won't be with us for more than a second.”

“A second? Just beaming down through outer space, is he?”

“Not space, old friend,” said Artemis, checking his wristwatch. “Time.” The boy sighed. “Anyway, the moment has passed. It seems as though I have brought us here for nothing. Our visitor has not materialized. The chances were slim. Obviously there was nobody at the other end of the rift.”

Butler didn't know what rift Artemis was referring to; he was simply relieved to be leaving this insecure location. The sooner they could get back to Barcelona Airport the better.

The bodyguard pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and hit a number on the speed dial. The person on the other end picked up on the first ring.

“Maria,” said Butler. “Collection, *pronto*.”

“*Sí*,” replied Maria tersely. Maria worked for an exclusive Spanish limousine company. She was extremely pretty and could break a breeze block with her forehead.

“Was that Maria?” said Artemis, mimicking casual conversation perfectly.

Butler was not fooled. Artemis Fowl rarely asked casual questions.

“Yes, that was Maria. You could tell because I used her name when I spoke to her. You don't usually ask so many questions about the limo driver. That's four in the past fifteen minutes. Will *Maria* be picking us up? Where do you think *Maria* is right now? How old do you think *Maria* is?”

Artemis rubbed his temples. “It's this blasted puberty, Butler. Every time I see a pretty girl, I waste valuable mind space thinking about her. The girl at that restaurant, for instance. I've glanced in her direction a dozen times in the past few minutes.”

Butler gave the pretty girl in question an automatic bodyguard's once-over.

She was twelve or thirteen, did not appear to be armed, and had a mane of extremely tight blond curls. The girl was studiously working her way through a selection of *tapas* while a male guardian, perhaps her father, read the paper. There was another man at the table who was struggling to stow a set of crutches under his chair. Butler judged that the girl was not a direct threat to their safety, though indirectly she could cause trouble if Artemis were unable to concentrate on his plan.

Butler patted his young charge on the shoulder. “It's normal to be distracted by girls. Natural. If you hadn't been so busy saving the world these past few years, it would have happened sooner.”

“Nevertheless, I have to control it, Butler. I have things to do.”

“Control puberty?” snorted the bodyguard. “If you manage that, you'll be the first.”

“I generally am,” said Artemis.

And it was true. No other teenager had kidnapped a fairy, rescued their father from the Russian *Mafiya*, and helped put down a goblin revolution by the tender age of fourteen.

A horn honked twice. From across the intersection, a young lady gestured through an open limousine window.

“It’s *Maria*,” said Artemis, then caught himself. “I mean, let us go. Maybe we’ll have better luck at the next site.”

Butler took the lead, stopping traffic with a wave of one massive palm. “Maybe we should take *Maria* with us. A full-time driver would make my job a lot easier.”

It took Artemis a moment to realize that he was being ribbed. “Very funny, Butler. You were joking, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“I thought so, but I don’t have a lot of experience with humor. Apart from Mulch Diggums.”

Mulch was a kleptomaniac dwarf who had stolen from, and for, Artemis on previous occasions. Diggums liked to think of himself as a funny fairy, and his main sources of humor were his own bodily functions.

“If you can call that humor,” said Butler, smiling in spite of himself at his own memories of the pungent dwarf.

Suddenly Artemis froze—in the middle of a heaving intersection.

Butler glowered at the three lanes of city traffic, a hundred impatient drivers leaning on their horns.

“I feel something,” breathed Artemis. “Electricity.”

“Could you please feel it on the other side of the road?” asked Butler.

Artemis stretched out his arms and felt a tingle on his palms.

“He’s coming, after all, but several yards off target. Somewhere there is a constant that is not constant.”

A shape formed in the air. From nothing came a cluster of sparks and the smell of sulfur. Inside the cluster, a gray-green thing appeared, with golden eyes, chunky scales, and great horned ears. It stepped out of nowhere and onto the road. It stood erect, five feet high, humanoid, but there was no mistaking this creature for human. It sniffed the air through slitted nostrils, opened a snake’s mouth, and spoke.

“Felicitations to Lady Heatherington Smythe,” it said in a voice of crushed glass and grating steel. The creature grasped Artemis’s outstretched palm with a four-fingered hand.

“Curious,” said the Irish boy.

Butler wasn’t interested in *curious*. He was interested in getting Artemis away from this creature as quickly as possible.

“Let’s go,” he said brusquely, laying a hand on Artemis’s shoulder.

But Artemis was already gone. The creature had disappeared as quickly as it had come, taking the teenager with him. The incident would make the news later that day, but strangely enough, in spite of the hundreds of tourists armed with cameras, there would be no pictures.

The creature was insubstantial, as though it did not have a proper hold on this world. Its grip on Artemis’s hand was soft with a hard core, like bone wrapped in foam rubber. Artemis did not try to pull away; he was fascinated.

“Lady Heatherington Smythe?” repeated the creature, and Artemis could hear that it was scared. “Dost this be her estate?”

Hardly modern syntax, thought Artemis. But definitely English. Now, how does a demon exiled in Limbo learn to speak English?

The air buzzed with power, and white electrical bolts crackled around the creature, slicing holes in space.

A temporal rent. A hole in time.

Artemis was not overly awed by this; after all, he had seen the Lower Elements Police actually *stop* time during the Fowl Manor siege. What did concern him was that he was likely to be whisked away with the creature, in which case the chances of him being returned to his own dimension were small. The chances of him being returned to his own time were minuscule.

He tried to call out to Butler, but it was too late. If the word *late* can be used in a place where time does not exist.

The rent had expanded to envelop both him and the demon. The architecture and population of Barcelona faded slowly like spirits, to be replaced first by a purple fog, then a galaxy of stars. Artemis experienced feverish heat, then bitter cold. He felt sure that if he materialized fully he would be scorched to cinders, then his ashes would freeze and scatter across space.

Their surroundings changed in a flash, or maybe a year; it was impossible to tell. The stars were replaced by an ocean, and they were underneath it. Strange deep-sea creatures loomed from the depths, luminous tentacles scything the water all around them. Then there was a field of ice, then a red landscape, the air filled with fine dust. Finally they were looking at Barcelona again. But different. The city was younger.

The demon howled and gnashed its pointed teeth, abandoning all attempts to speak English. Luckily, Artemis was one of two humans in any dimension who spoke Gnommish, the fairy language.

“Calm yourself, friend,” he said. “Our fate is sealed. Enjoy these beautiful sights.”

The demon’s howl ceased abruptly, and he dropped Artemis’s hand.

“Speak you fairy tongue?”

“Gnommish,” corrected Artemis. “And better than you, I might add.”

The demon fell silent, regarding Artemis as though he were some kind of wondrous creature. Which, of course, he was. Artemis, for his part, spent what could possibly be the last few moments of his life observing the scene before him. They were materializing at a building site. It was the Casa Milà, but not yet completed. Workmen swarmed across scaffold erected at the front of the building, and a swarthy bearded man stood scowling at a sheet of architectural drawings.

Artemis smiled. It was Gaudí himself. How amazing.

The scene solidified, colors painting themselves brighter. Artemis could smell the dry Spanish air now, and the heavy tangs of sweat and paint.

“Excuse me?” said Artemis in Spanish.

Gaudí looked up from the drawings, and his scowl was replaced with a look of utter disbelief. There was a boy stepping from thin air. Beside him a cowering demon. The brilliant architect absorbed every detail of the tableau, committing it to his memory forever.

“Sí?” he said hesitantly.

Artemis pointed to the top of the building. “You’ve got some mosaics planned for the roof. You might want to rethink those. Very derivative.”

Then boy and demon disappeared.

Butler had not panicked when a creature had stepped out a the hole in time. Then again, he *was* trained not to panic, no matter how extreme the situation. Unfortunately, nobody else at the Passeig de Gràcia intersection had attended Madam Ko’s Personal Protection Academy, and so they proceeded to panic just as loudly and quickly as they could. All except the curly-haired girl and the two men with her.

When the demon appeared, the public froze. When the creature disappeared, they unfroze

explosively. The air was rent with the sounds of shouting and screaming. Drivers abandoned their cars, or simply drove them into store windows to escape. A wave of humans withdrew from the point of materialization as though repelled by an invisible force. Again, the girl and her companions bucked the trend, actually running toward the spot where the demon had shown up. The man with the crutches displayed remarkable agility for one who was supposedly injured.

Butler ignored the pandemonium, concentrating on his right hand. Or rather, where his right hand had been a second earlier. Just before Artemis fizzled into another dimension, Butler had managed to get a grip on his shoulder. Now the disappearing virus had claimed his own hand. He was going wherever Artemis had gone. He could still feel his young charge's bony shoulder in his grip.

Butler fully expected his arm to disappear, but it didn't. Just the hand. He could still feel it in an underwater pins-and-needles kind of way. And he could still feel Artemis.

"No, you don't," he grunted, tightening his invisible grip. "I've put up with too much hardship over the years for you to vanish on me now."

And so Butler reached down through the decades and yanked his young charge back from the past.

Artemis didn't come easy. It was like dragging a boulder through a sea of mud, but Butler was not the kind of person who gave up easily, either. He planted his feet and put his back into it. Artemis popped out of the twentieth century and landed sprawling in the twenty-first.

"I'm back," said the Irish boy, as if he had simply returned from an everyday errand. "How unexpected."

Butler picked his principal up and gave him a perfunctory examination.

"Everything is in the right place. Nothing broken. Now, Artemis, tell me, what is twenty-seven multiplied by eighteen point five?"

Artemis straightened his suit jacket. "Oh, I see, you're checking my mental faculties. Very good. I suppose it's conceivable that time travel could affect the mind."

"Just answer the question!" insisted Butler.

"Four hundred and ninety-nine point five, if you must know."

"I'll take your word for it."

The giant bodyguard cocked his head to one side. "Sirens. We need to get out of this area, Artemis, before I'm forced to cause an international incident."

He hustled Artemis to the other side of the road, to the only car still idling there. Maria looked a little pale, but at least she had not abandoned her clients.

"Well done," said Butler, flinging open the rear door. "Airport. Stay off the highway as much as possible."

Maria barely waited until Butler and Artemis were belted before burning rubber down the street, ignoring the traffic lights. The blond girl and her companions were left on the roadside.

Maria glanced at Artemis in the mirror. "What happened out there?"

"No questions," said Butler curtly. "Eyes on the road. Drive."

He knew better than to ask questions himself. Artemis would explain all about the strange creature and the shining rift when he was ready.

Artemis remained silent as the limousine swung down toward Las Ramblas and from there into the labyrinthine back streets of downtown Barcelona.

"How did I get here?" he said eventually, musing aloud. "Or rather, why aren't we there? Or why aren't we *then*? What anchored us to this time?" He looked at Butler. "Are you wearing any silver?"

Butler grimaced sheepishly. “You know I never usually wear jewelry, but there is this.” He shot one cuff. There was a leather bracelet on his wrist with a silver nugget in the center. “Juliet sent it to me. From Mexico. It’s to ward off evil spirits, apparently. She made me promise to wear it.”

Artemis smiled broadly. “It was Juliet. She anchored us.” He tapped the silver nugget on Butler’s wrist. “You should give your sister a call. She saved our lives.”

As Artemis tapped his bodyguard’s wristband, he noticed something about his own fingers. They *were* his fingers, no doubt about it. But different, somehow. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

He had, of course, done some theorizing on the hypothetical results of interdimensional travel, and concluded that there could possibly be some deterioration of the original, as with a computer program that has been copied once too often. Streams of information could be lost in the ether.

As far as Artemis could tell, nothing had been lost, but now the index finger on his left hand was longer than the second finger. Or more accurately, the index finger had swapped places with the second finger.

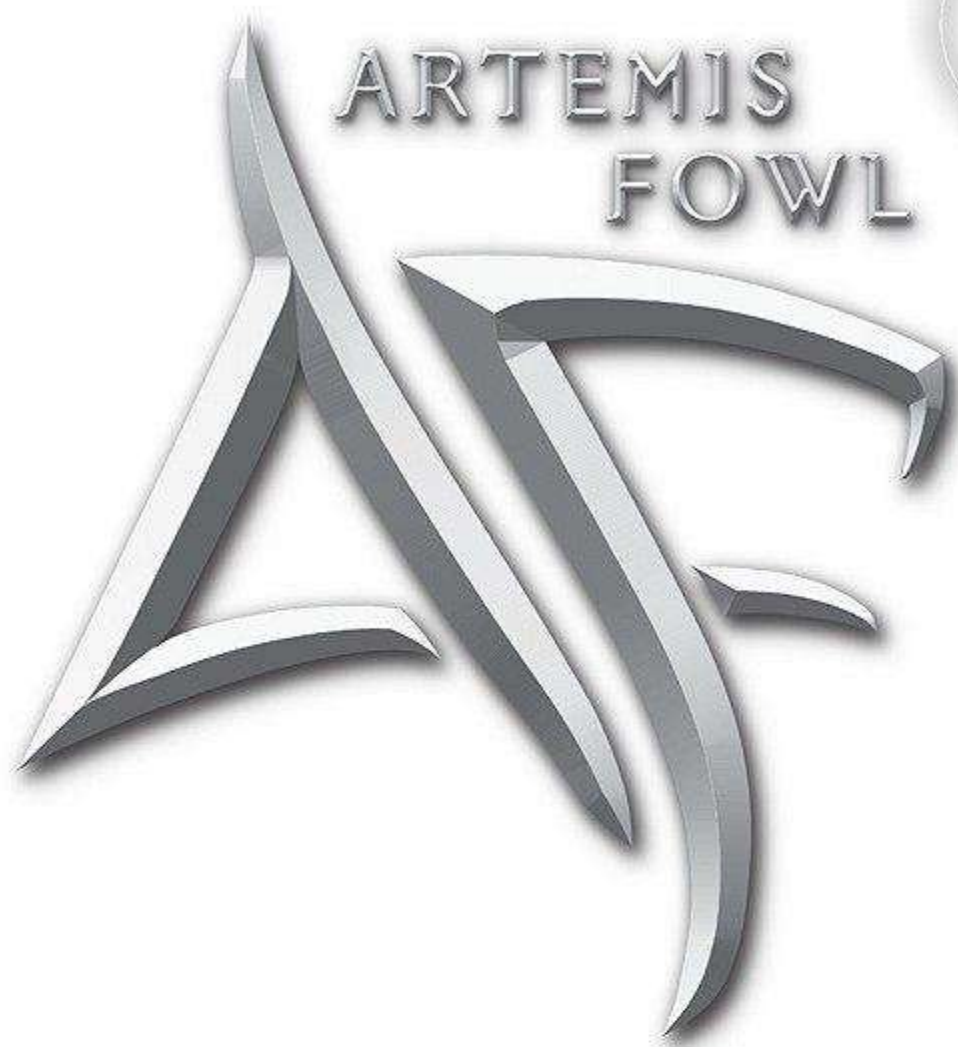
He flexed the fingers experimentally.

“Hmm,” noted Artemis Fowl. “I am unique.”

Butler grunted.

“Tell me about it,” he said.

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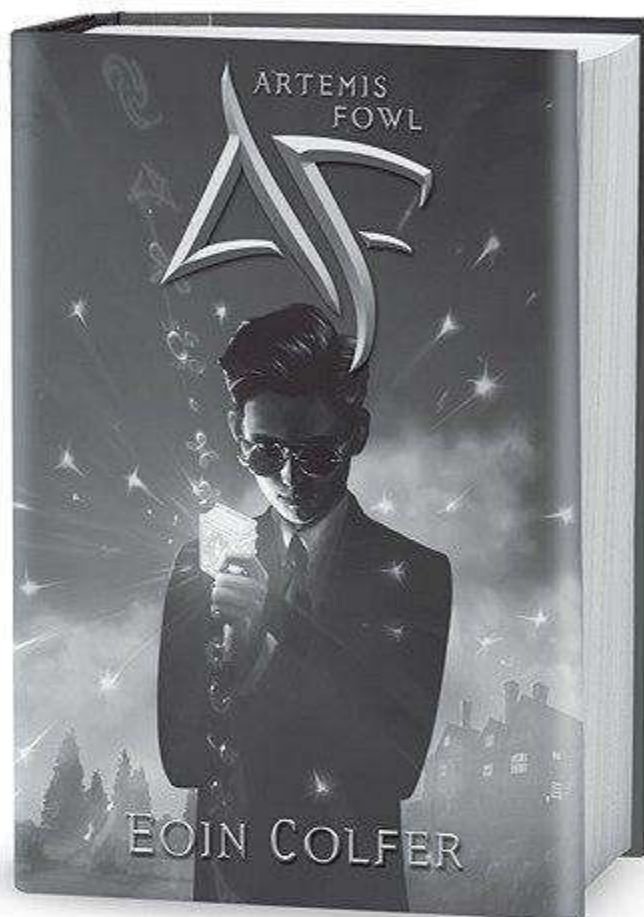
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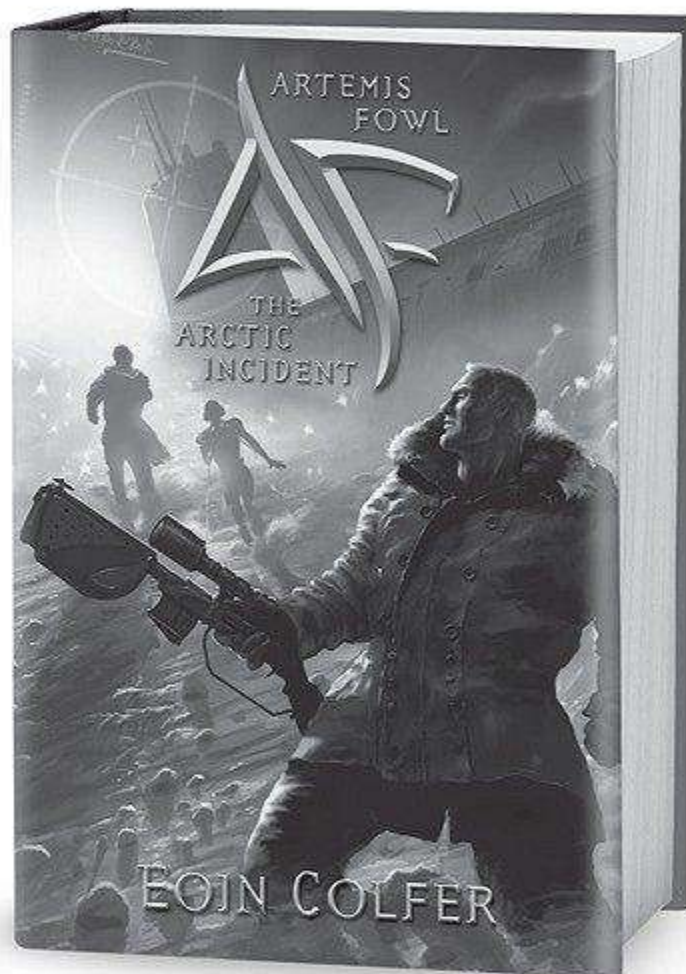
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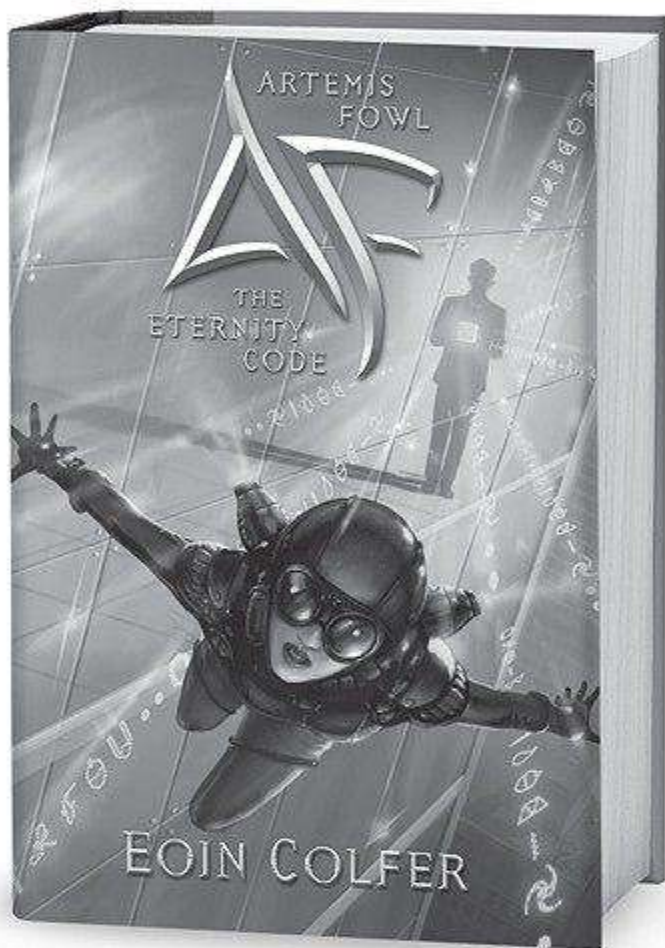
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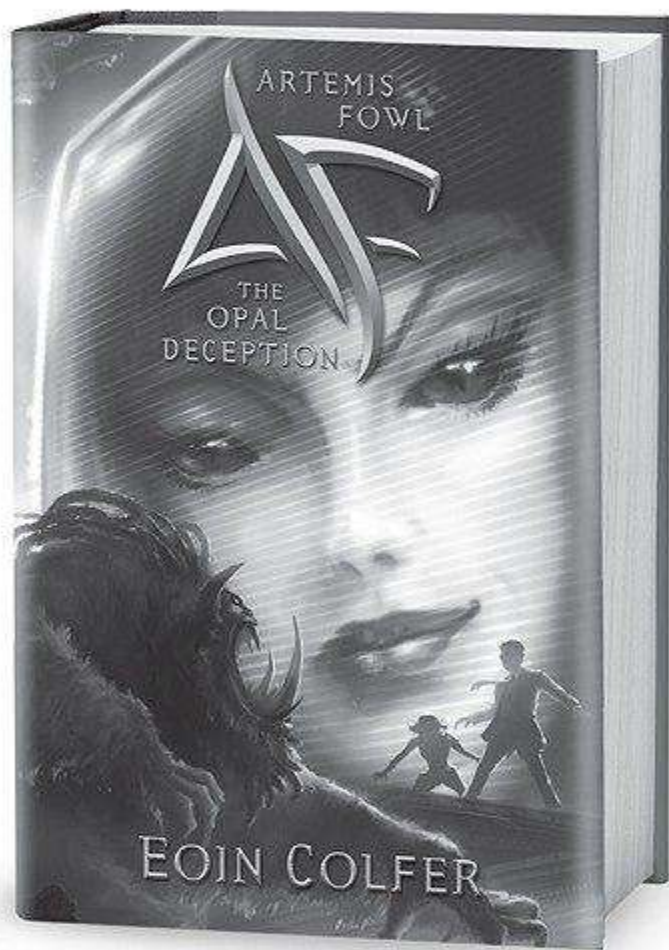
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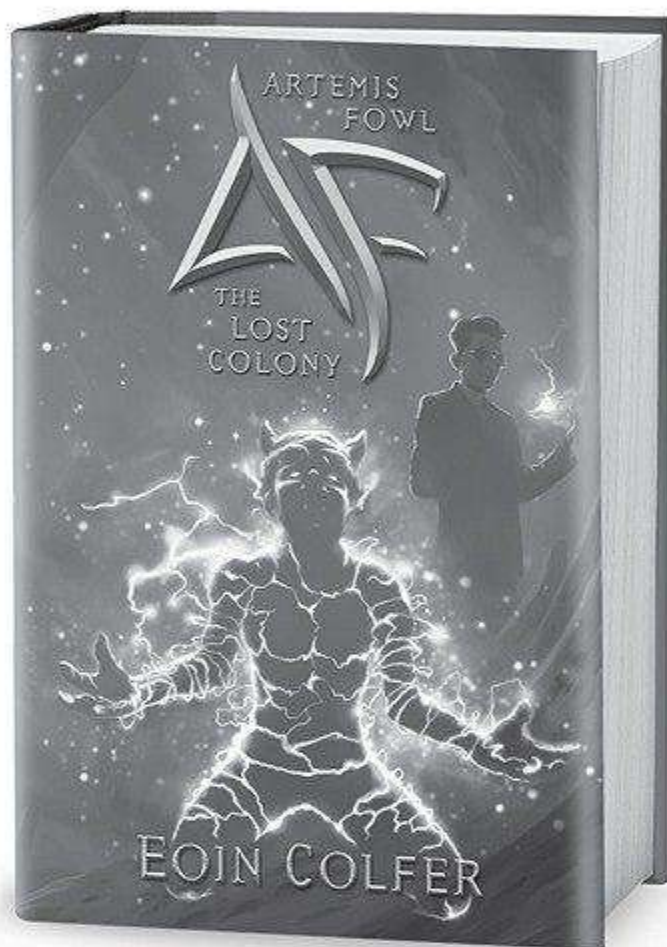
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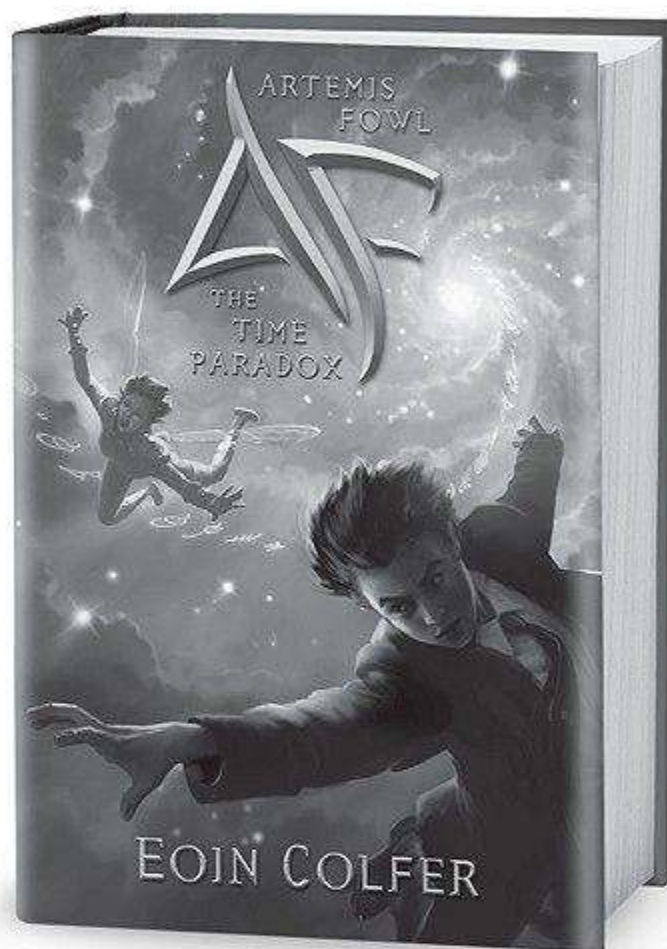
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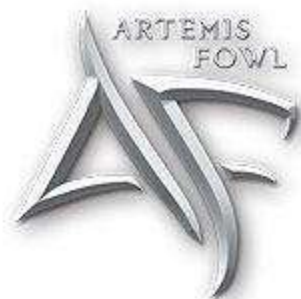
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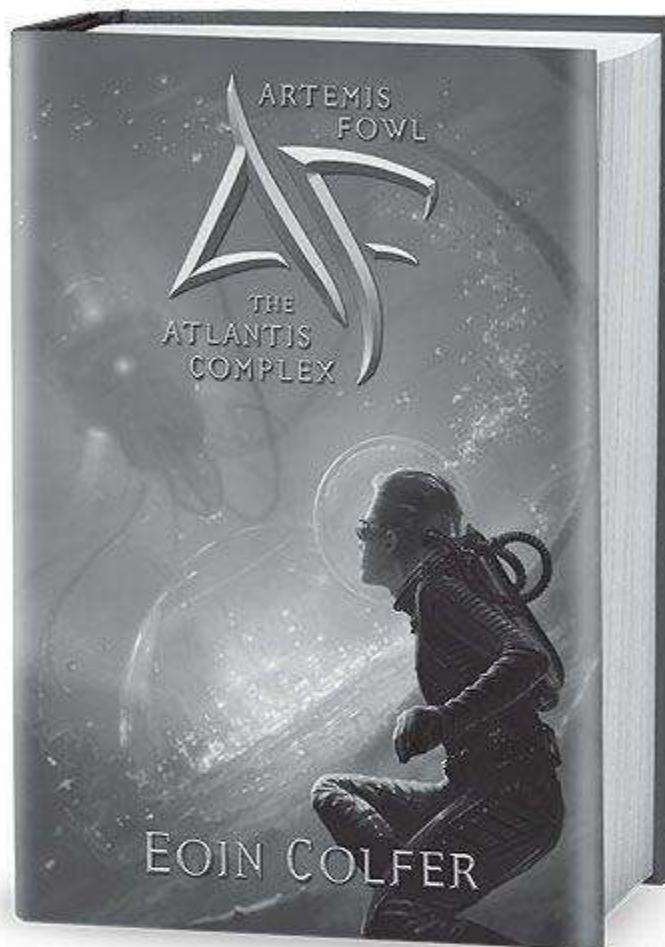
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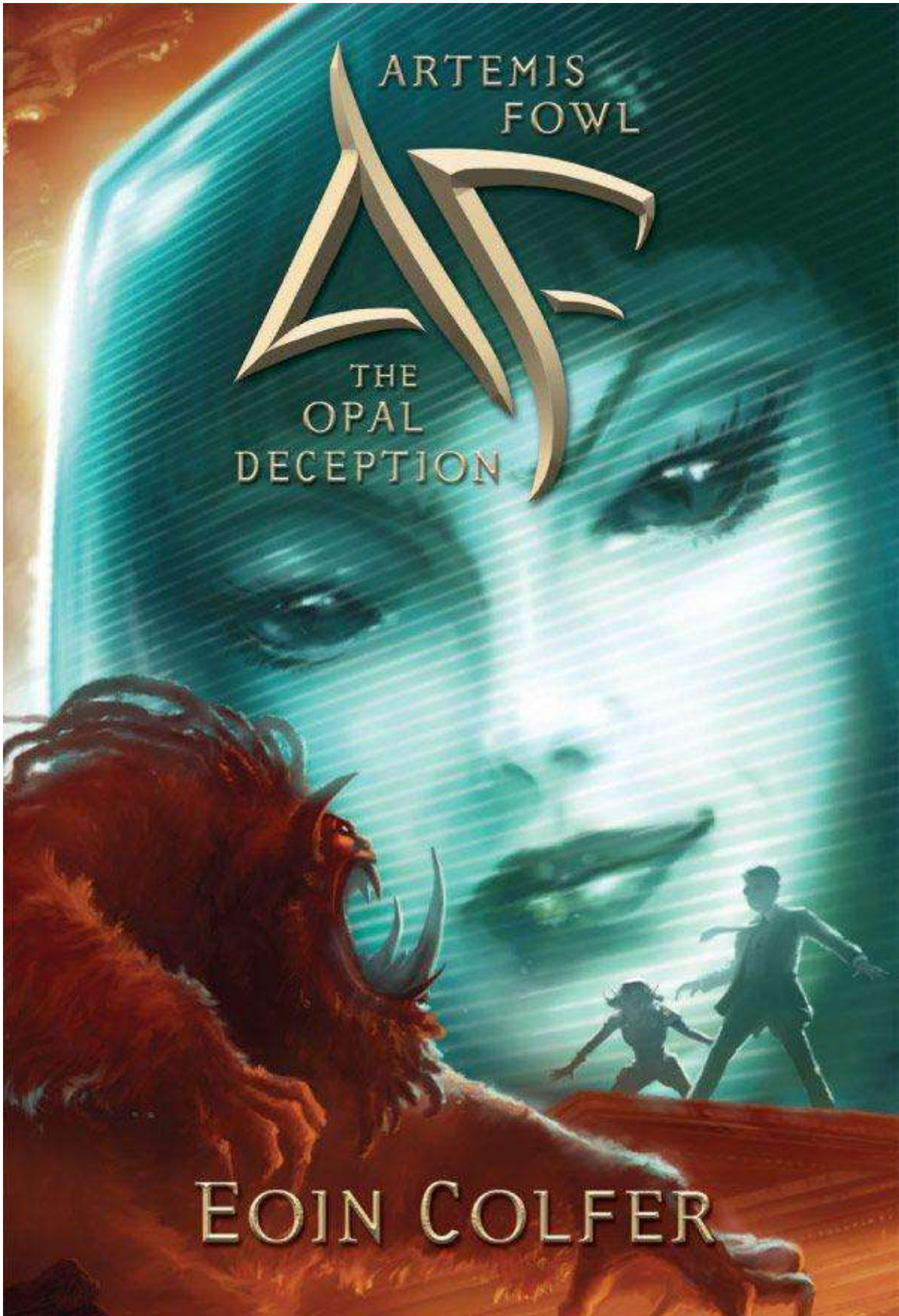
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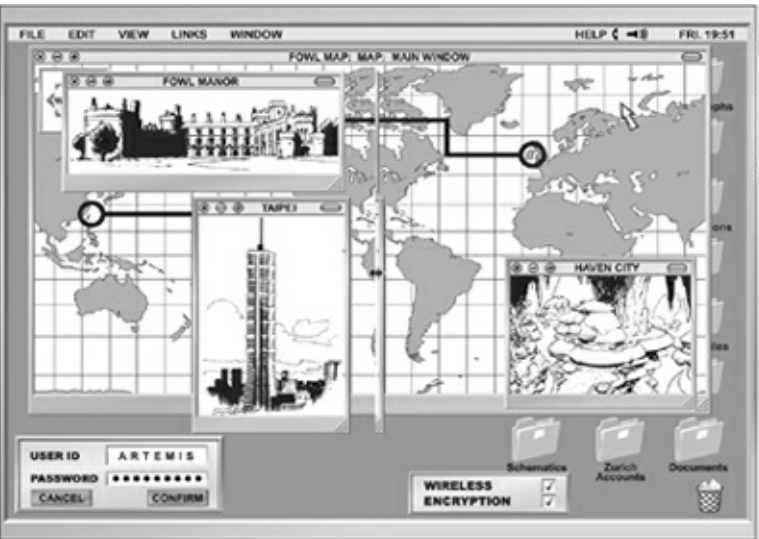
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CHAPTER 1: BLAST TO THE PAST

BARCELONA, SPAIN



HAPPY was not a word often used to describe Artemis Fowl's bodyguard. *Jolly* and *contented* were also words that were rarely applied to him or to people in his immediate vicinity. Butler did not get to be one of the most dangerous men in the world by chatting with anyone who happened to stroll past, unless the chat concerned exit routes and concealed weapons.

On this particular afternoon Butler and Artemis were in Spain, and the bodyguard's Eurasian features were even more taciturn than normal. His young charge was, as usual, making Butler's job more complicated than it needed to be. Artemis had insisted that they stand on the pavement of Barcelona's Passeig de Gràcia for over an hour in the afternoon sun with only a few slender trees to provide them with cover from the heat or possible enemies.

This was the fourth unexplained trip to foreign locations in as many months. First Edinburgh, then Death Valley in the American West, followed by an extremely arduous trek to doubly landlocked Uzbekistan. And now Barcelona. All to wait for a mysterious *visitor*, who had not as yet made an appearance.

They made an odd couple on the busy pathway. A huge, muscular man: forties, Hugo Boss suit, shaven head. And a slight teenager: pale, raven-haired with large, piercing blue-black eyes.

'Why must you circle so, Butler?' asked Artemis, irritated. He knew the answer to his own question, but according to his calculations, the expected visitor to Barcelona was a minute late, and he allowed his annoyance to transfer to the bodyguard.

'You know perfectly well why, Artemis,' replied Butler. 'In case there is a sniper or an audio-tech on one of the rooftops. I am circling to provide the maximum cover.'

Artemis was in the mood to demonstrate his genius. This was a mood in which he frequently found himself. And as satisfying as these demonstrations were for the fourteen-year-old Irish boy, they could be intensely irritating for anyone on the receiving end.

‘Firstly, it is hardly likely that there is a sniper gunning for me,’ he said. ‘I have liquidated eighty per cent of my illegal ventures and spread the capital across an extremely lucrative portfolio. Secondly, any audio-tech trying to eavesdrop on us may as well pack up and go home as the third button on your jacket is emitting a Solinium pulse that whites out any surveillance tape, human or fairy.’

Butler glanced at a passing couple, who were bewitched by Spain and young love. The man had a camcorder slung round his neck. Butler fingered his third button guiltily.

‘We may have ruined a few honeymoon videos,’ he noted.

Artemis shrugged. ‘A small price to pay for my privacy.’

‘Was there a third point?’ asked Butler innocently.

‘Yes,’ said Artemis, a touch testily. Still no sign of the individual he was expecting. ‘I was about to say that if there is a gunman on one of these buildings, it’s that one directly to the rear. So you should stay behind me.’

Butler was the best bodyguard in the business, and even he couldn’t be a hundred per cent sure which rooftop a potential gunman would be on.

‘Go on. Tell me how you know. I know you’re dying to.’

‘Very well, since you ask. No sniper would position himself on the rooftop of Casa Milá, directly across the street, because it is open to the public and so his access and escape would probably be recorded.’

‘His or her,’ corrected Butler. ‘Most metal men are women these days.’

‘His or her,’ amended Artemis. ‘The two buildings on the right are somewhat screened by foliage, so why handicap yourself?’

‘Very good. Go on.’

‘The cluster behind us to the left is a group of financial buildings with private security stickers on the windows. A professional will avoid any confrontation he is not being paid for.’

Butler nodded. It was true.

‘And so, I logically conclude that your imaginary sniper would pick the four-storey construction to our rear. It is residential, so access is easy. The roof affords him *or her* a direct line of fire, and the security is possibly dismal and more than likely non-existent.’

Butler snorted. Artemis was probably right. But in the protection game, *probably* wasn't nearly as comforting as a Kevlar vest.

‘You're *probably* right,’ admitted the bodyguard. ‘But only if the sniper is as smart as you are.’

‘Good point,’ said Artemis.

‘And I imagine you could put together a convincing argument for any one of these buildings. You just picked that one to keep me out of your line of vision, which leads me to believe that whoever you're expecting will turn up outside Casa Milá.’

Artemis smiled. ‘Well done, old friend.’

Casa Milá was an early twentieth-century dwelling designed by the Spanish art nouveau architect Antonio Gaudí. The facade consisted of curved walls and balconies topped by twisted ironworks. The walkway outside the building was thronged with tourists, lining up for the afternoon tour of the spectacular house.

‘Will we recognize our visitor among all these people? Are you sure that he is not already here? Watching us?’

Artemis smiled and his eyes glittered. ‘Believe me, he is not here. If he were, there would be a lot more screaming.’

Butler scowled. Once, just once, he would like to get all the facts before they boarded the jet. But that wasn't the way Artemis worked. To the young Irish genius, the *reveal* was the most important part of his schemes.

‘At least tell me if our contact will be armed.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Artemis. ‘And even if he is, he won't be with us for more than a second.’

‘A second? Just beaming down through outer space, is he?’

‘Not space, old friend,’ said Artemis, checking his wristwatch. ‘Time.’ The boy sighed.

‘Anyway, the moment has passed. It seems as though I have brought us here for nothing. Our visitor has not materialized. The chances were slim. Obviously, there was nobody at the other end of the rift.’

Butler didn’t know what rift Artemis was referring to; he was simply relieved to be leaving this insecure location. The sooner they could get back to Barcelona Airport the better.

The bodyguard pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and hit a number on the speed dial. The person on the other end picked up on the first ring.

‘Maria,’ said Butler. ‘Collection, *pronto*.’

‘Si,’ replied Maria tersely. Maria worked for an exclusive Spanish limousine company. She was extremely pretty and could break a breeze block with her forehead.

‘Was that Maria?’ said Artemis, mimicking casual conversation perfectly.

Butler was not fooled. Artemis Fowl rarely asked casual questions.

‘Yes, that was Maria. You could tell because I used her name when I spoke to her. You don’t usually ask so many questions about the limo driver. That’s four in the past fifteen minutes. Will *Maria* be picking us up? Where do you think *Maria* is right now? How old do you think *Maria* is?’

Artemis rubbed his temples. ‘It’s this blasted puberty, Butler. Every time I see a pretty girl, I waste valuable mind space thinking about her. That girl at the restaurant for instance. I’ve glanced in her direction a dozen times in the past few minutes.’

Butler gave the pretty girl in question an automatic bodyguard’s once-over.

She was twelve or thirteen, did not appear to be armed and had a mane of tight blonde curls. The girl was studiously working her way through a selection of *tapas* while a male guardian, perhaps her father, read the paper. There was another man at the table who was struggling to stow a set of crutches under his chair. Butler judged that the girl was not a direct threat to their safety, though indirectly she could cause trouble if Artemis was unable to concentrate on his plan.

Butler patted his young charge on the shoulder. ‘It’s normal to be distracted by girls. Natural. If you hadn’t been so busy saving the world these past few years, it would have

happened sooner.'

'Nevertheless, I have to control it, Butler. I have things to do.'

'Control puberty?' snorted the bodyguard. 'If you manage that, you'll be the first.'

'I generally am,' said Artemis.

And it was true. No other teenager had kidnapped a fairy, rescued their father from the Russian Mafiya and helped put down a goblin revolution by the tender age of fourteen.

A horn honked twice. From across the intersection, a young lady gestured through an open limousine window.

'It's *Maria*,' said Artemis, then caught himself. 'I mean, let us go. Maybe we'll have better luck at the next site.'

Butler took the lead, stopping the traffic with a wave of one massive palm. 'Maybe we should take Maria with us. A full-time driver would make my job a lot easier.'

It took Artemis a moment to realize that he was being ribbed. 'Very funny, Butler. You were joking, weren't you?'

'Yes, I was.'

'I thought so, but I don't have a lot of experience with humour. Apart from Mulch Diggums.'

Mulch was a kleptomaniac dwarf who had stolen from, and for, Artemis on previous occasions. Diggums liked to think of himself as a funny fairy, and his main sources of humour were his own bodily functions.

'If you can call that humour,' said Butler, smiling, in spite of himself, at his own memories of the pungent dwarf.

And suddenly Artemis froze. In the middle of a heaving intersection.

Butler glowered at the three lanes of city traffic, a hundred impatient drivers leaning on their horns.

'I feel something,' breathed Artemis. 'Electricity.'

'Could you feel it on the other side of the road?' asked Butler.

Artemis stretched out his arms, feeling a tingle on his palms.

‘He’s coming after all, but several metres off target. Somewhere there is a constant that is not constant.’

A shape formed in the air. From nothing came a cluster of sparks and the smell of sulphur. Inside the cluster a grey-green thing appeared, with golden eyes, chunky scales and great horned ears. It stepped out of nowhere and on to the road. It stood erect, five feet high, humanoid, but there was no mistaking this creature for human. It sniffed the air through slitted nostrils, opened a snake’s mouth and spoke.

‘Felicitations to Lady Heatherington Smythe,’ it said in a voice of crushed glass and grating steel. The creature grasped Artemis’s outstretched palm with a four-fingered hand.

‘Curious,’ said the Irish boy.

Butler wasn’t interested in *curious*. He was interested in getting Artemis away from this creature as quickly as possible.

‘Let’s go,’ he said brusquely, laying a hand on Artemis’s shoulder.

But Artemis was already gone. The creature had disappeared as quickly as it had come, taking the teenager with him. The incident would make the news later that day, but strangely enough, in spite of the hundreds of tourists armed with cameras, there would be no pictures.

The creature was insubstantial, as though it did not have a proper hold on this world. Its grip on Artemis’s hand was soft with a hard core, like bone wrapped in foam rubber. Artemis did not try to pull away; he was fascinated.

‘Lady Heatherington Smythe?’ repeated the creature, and Artemis could hear that it was scared. ‘Dost this be her estate?’

Hardly modern syntax, thought Artemis. But definitely English. Now how does a demon exiled in Limbo learn to speak English?

The air buzzed with power and white electrical bolts crackled around the creature, slicing holes in space.

A temporal rent. A hole in time.

Artemis was not overly awed by this – after all, he had seen the Lower Elements Police actually *stop* time during the Fowl Manor siege. What did concern him was that he was likely to be whisked away with the creature, in which case the chances of him being returned to his own dimension were small. The chances of him being returned to his own time were minuscule.

He tried to call out to Butler, but it was too late. If the word *late* can be used in a place where time does not exist. The rent had expanded to envelop both him and the demon. The architecture and population of Barcelona faded slowly like spirits to be replaced first by a purple fog, then a galaxy of stars. Artemis experienced feverish heat, then bitter cold. He felt sure that if he materialized fully he would be scorched to cinders, then his ashes would freeze and scatter across space.

Their surroundings changed in a flash, or maybe a year; it was impossible to tell. The stars were replaced by an ocean, and they were underneath it. Strange deep-sea creatures loomed from the depths, luminous tentacles scything the water all around them. Then there was a field of ice, then a red landscape, the air filled with fine dust. Finally, they were looking at Barcelona again. But different. The city was younger.

The demon howled and gnashed its pointed teeth, abandoning all attempts to speak English. Luckily, Artemis was one of two humans in any dimension who spoke Gnommish, the fairy language.

‘Calm yourself, friend,’ he said. ‘Our fate is sealed. Enjoy these wondrous sights.’

The demon’s howl ceased abruptly, and he dropped Artemis’s hand.

‘Speak you fairy tongue?’

‘Gnommish,’ corrected Artemis. ‘And better than you, I might add.’

The demon fell silent, regarding Artemis as though he was some kind of fantastic creature. Which, of course, he was. Artemis, for his part, spent what could possibly be the last few moments of his life observing the scene before him. They were materializing at a building site. It was the Casa Milá, but not yet completed. Workmen swarmed across scaffolding erected at the front of the building and a swarthy, bearded man stood scowling at a sheet of architectural drawings.

Artemis smiled. It was Gaudí himself. How amazing.

The scene solidified, colours painting themselves brighter. Artemis could smell the dry Spanish air now, and the heavy tangs of sweat and paint.

‘Excuse me?’ said Artemis in Spanish.

Gaudí looked up from the drawings, and his scowl was replaced with a look of utter disbelief. There was a boy stepping from thin air. Beside him a cowering demon.

The brilliant architect absorbed every detail of the tableau, committing it to his memory forever.

‘*Si?*’ he said hesitantly.

Artemis pointed to the top of the building. ‘You’ve got some mosaics planned for the roof. You might want to rethink those. Very derivative.’

Then boy and demon disappeared.

Butler did not panic when a creature stepped out of the hole in time. Then again, he *was* trained not to panic, no matter how extreme the situation. Unfortunately, nobody else at the Passeig de Gràcia intersection had attended Madame Ko’s Personal Protection Academy and so they proceeded to panic just as loudly and quickly as they could. All except the curly-haired girl and the two men with her.

When the demon appeared, the public froze. When the creature disappeared they unfroze explosively. The air was rent with the sounds of shouting and screaming. Drivers abandoned their cars, or simply drove them into store windows to escape. A wave of humans withdrew from the point of materialization as though repelled by an invisible force. Again, the girl and her companions bucked the trend, actually running towards the spot where the demon had shown up. The man with the crutches displayed remarkable agility for one who was supposedly injured.

Butler ignored the pandemonium, concentrating on his right hand. Or rather where his right hand had been a second earlier. Just before Artemis fizzled into another dimension, Butler had managed to get a grip on his shoulder. Now the disappearing virus had claimed his own hand. He was going wherever Artemis had gone. He could still feel his young charge’s bony shoulder in his grip.

Butler fully expected his arm to vanish, but it didn't. Just the hand. He could still feel it in an underwater-pins-and-needles kind of way. And he could still feel Artemis.

'No, you don't,' he grunted, tightening his invisible grip. 'I've put up with too much hardship over the years for you to disappear on me now.'

And so Butler reached down through the decades and yanked his young charge back from the past.

Artemis didn't come easy. It was like dragging a boulder through a sea of mud, but Butler was not the kind of person that gave up easily. He planted his feet and put his back into it. Artemis popped out of the twentieth century and landed sprawling in the twenty-first.

'I'm back,' said the Irish boy, as if he had simply returned from an everyday errand. 'How unexpected.'

Butler picked his principal up and gave him a perfunctory examination.

'Everything is in the right place. Nothing broken. Now, Artemis, tell me, what is twenty-seven multiplied by eighteen point five?'

Artemis straightened his suit jacket. 'Oh, I see, you're checking my mental faculties. Very good. I suppose it's conceivable that time travel could affect the mind.'

'Just answer the question!' insisted Butler.

'Four hundred and ninety-nine point five, if you must know.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

The giant bodyguard cocked his head to one side. 'Sirens. We need to get out of this area, Artemis, before I'm forced to cause an international incident.'

He hustled Artemis to the other side of the road, to the only car still idling there. Maria looked a little pale, but at least she had not abandoned her clients.

'Well done,' said Butler, flinging open the rear door. 'Airport. Stay off the motorway as much as possible.'

Maria barely waited until Butler and Artemis were belted, before burning rubber down the street, ignoring the traffic lights. The blonde girl and her companions were left on the roadside behind them.

Maria glanced at Artemis in the mirror. 'What happened out there?'

'No questions,' said Butler curtly. 'Eyes on the road. Drive.'

He knew better than to ask questions himself. Artemis would explain all about the strange creature and the shining rift when he was ready.

Artemis remained silent as the limousine swung down towards Las Ramblas and from there into the labyrinthine backstreets of downtown Barcelona.

'How did I get here?' he said eventually. Musing aloud. 'Or rather why aren't we there? Or why aren't we *then*? What anchored us to this time?' He looked at Butler. 'Are you wearing any silver?'

Butler grimaced sheepishly. 'You know I never usually wear jewellery, but there is this.' He shot one cuff. There was a leather bracelet on his wrist, with a silver nugget in the centre. 'Juliet sent it to me. From Mexico. It's to ward off evil spirits apparently. She made me promise to wear it.'

Artemis smiled broadly. 'It was Juliet. She anchored us.' He tapped the silver nugget on Butler's wrist. 'You should give your sister a call. She saved our lives.'

As Artemis tapped his bodyguard's wristband, he noticed something about his own fingers. They *were* his fingers, no doubt about it. But different somehow. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

He had, of course, done some theorizing on the hypothetical results of interdimensional travel, and concluded that there could possibly be some deterioration of the original, as with a computer program that has been copied once too often. Streams of information could be lost in the ether.

As far as Artemis could tell, nothing had been lost, but now the index finger on his left hand was longer than the second finger. Or more accurately, the index finger had swapped places with the second finger.

He flexed the fingers experimentally.

'Hmm,' noted Artemis Fowl. 'I am unique.'

Butler grunted. 'Tell me about it,' he said.

CHAPTER 2: DOODAH DAY

HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS



HOLLY Short's career as an elfin private investigator was not working out as well as she'd hoped. This was mainly because the Lower Elements' most popular current events show had run not one, but two specials on her over the past few months. It was difficult to go undercover when her face was forever popping up on cable reruns.

'Surgery?' suggested a voice in her head.

This voice was not the first sign of madness; it was her partner, Mulch Diggums, communicating from his mike to her earpiece.

'What?' she said, her voice carrying to her own microphone, a tiny flesh-coloured chip glued to her throat.

'I'm looking at a poster of your famous face, and I'm thinking that you should have some cosmetic surgery if we want to stay in business. And I mean real business, not this bounty-hunting game. Bounty hunters are the lowest of the low.'

Holly sighed. Her dwarf partner was right. Even criminals were considered more trustworthy than bounty hunters.

'A few implants and a reshaped nose and even your best friend wouldn't recognize you,' continued Mulch Diggums. 'It's not as if you're a beauty queen.'

'Forget it,' said Holly. She was fond of the face she had. It reminded her of her mother's.

'What about a skin spray? You could go green, disguise yourself as a sprite.'

'Mulch? Are you in position?' snapped Holly.

'Yep,' came the dwarf's reply. 'Any sign of the pixie?'

'No, he's not up and about yet, but he will be soon. So stop the chatter and just get ready.'

‘Hey, we’re partners now. No more criminal and police officer. I don’t have to take orders from you.’

‘Get ready, *please*.’

‘No problem. Mulch Diggums, lowlife bounty hunter, signing off.’

Holly sighed. Sometimes she missed the discipline of the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance Division. When an order was given, it was followed. Although if she was honest, Holly had to admit she had got herself into trouble more than once for disobeying a direct command.

She had only survived in LEPrecon for as long as she had because of a few high-profile arrests. *And* because of her mentor, Commander Julius Root.

Holly felt her heart lurch as she remembered, for the thousandth time, that Julius was dead. She could go for hours without thinking about it, then it would hit her. Every time like the first time.

She had quit the LEP because Julius’s replacement had actually accused her of murdering the Commander. Holly figured with a boss like that, she could do the fairy People more good outside the system. It was starting to look like she had been dead wrong. In her time as LEPrecon Captain she had been involved in putting down a goblin revolution, thwarting a plan to expose the subterranean fairy culture to the humans and reclaiming stolen fairy technology from a Mud Man in Chicago. Now she was tracking a fish smuggler who had skipped out on his bail. Not exactly national security stuff.

‘What about shin extensions?’ said Mulch, interrupting her thoughts. ‘You could be taller in hours.’

Holly smiled. As irritating as her partner was, he could always cheer her up. Also, as a dwarf, Mulch had special talents which came in very handy in their new line of business. Until recently, he had used these skills to break *into* houses and *out* of prisons, but now he was on the side of the angels, or so he swore. Unfortunately, all fairies knew that a dwarf’s vow to a non-dwarf wasn’t worth the spit-sodden handshake that sealed the deal.

‘Maybe you could get a brain extension,’ Holly retorted.

Mulch chortled. ‘Oh, brilliant. I must write that one down in my witty retorts book.’

Holly was trying to come up with an actual witty retort when their target appeared at the motel-room door. He was a harmless-looking pixie, barely half a metre high, but you didn't have to be tall to drive a lorry of fish. The smuggling bosses hired pixies as drivers and couriers because they looked so innocent and childlike. Holly had read this pixie's jacket, and she knew that he was anything but innocent.

Doodah Day had been smuggling livestock to illegal restaurants for over a century. In smuggling circles he was something of a legend. As an ex-criminal, Mulch was privy to criminal folklore and was able to supply Holly with all kinds of useful information that wouldn't find its way into an LEP report. For instance, Doodah had once made the heavily patrolled Atlantis–Haven run in under six hours without losing a fish from the tank.

Doodah had been arrested in the Atlantis Trench by a squad of LEP water sprites. He had skipped out en route from a holding cell to the courthouse, and now Holly had tracked him here. The bounty on Doodah Day was enough to pay six months' rent on their office. The plaque on the door read: *Short and Diggums. Private Investigators.*

Doodah Day stepped out of his room, scowling at the world in general. He zipped his jacket then headed south towards the shopping district. Holly stayed twenty steps back, hiding her face underneath a hood. This street had traditionally been a rough spot, but the Council were putting millions of ingots into a major revamp. In five years, there would be no more goblin ghetto. Huge yellow multi-mixers were chewing up old pavement and laying down brand-new paths behind them. Overhead, public service sprites unhooked burned-out sunstrips from the tunnel ceiling and replaced them with new molecule models.

The pixie followed the same route that he had for the past three days. He strolled down the road to the nearest plaza, picked up a carton of vole curry at a kiosk, then bought a ticket to the twenty-four-hour movie theatre. If he stayed true to form, then Doodah would be in there for at least eight hours.

Not if I can help it, thought Holly. She was determined to get this case wrapped by close of business. It wouldn't be easy. Doodah was small, but he was fast. Without weapons or restraints, it would be almost impossible to contain him. *Almost impossible,* but there was a way.

Holly bought a ticket from the gnome attendant, then settled into a seat two rows behind the target. The theatre was pretty quiet at this time of day. There were maybe fifty patrons

besides themselves. Most of them weren't even wearing theatre goggles. This was just somewhere to put in a few hours between meals.

The theatre was running *The Hill of Tailte* trilogy nonstop. The trilogy told a cinematic version of the events surrounding the Hill of Tailte battle, where the humans had finally forced the fairies underground. The final part of the trilogy had cleaned up at the AMP awards a couple of years ago. The effects were splendid and there was even a special edition interactive version, where the player could become one of the minor characters.

Looking at the movie now, Holly felt the same pang of loss as she always did. The People should be living above ground; instead, they were stuck in this technologically advanced cave.

Holly watched the sweeping aerial views and slow-motion battles for forty minutes, then she moved into the aisle and threw off her hood. In her LEP days she would simply have come up behind the pixie and stuck her Neutrino 3000 in his back, but civilians were not allowed to carry weapons of any kind, and so a more subtle strategy would have to be employed.

She called the pixie from the aisle.

'Hey, you. Aren't you Doodah Day?'

The pixie jumped from his seat, which did not make him any taller. He fixed his fiercest scowl on his features and threw it Holly's way. 'Who wants to know?'

'The LEP,' replied Holly. Technically, she had not identified herself as a member of the LEP, which would be impersonating a police officer.

Doodah squinted at her. 'I know you. You're that female elf. The one who tackled the goblins. I've seen you on digital. You're not LEP any more.'

Holly felt her heartbeat speed up. It was good to be back in action. Any kind of action.

'Maybe not, Doodah, but I'm still here to bring you in. Are you going to come quietly?'

'And spend a few centuries in the Atlantis pen? What do you think?' said Doodah Day, dropping to his knees.

The little pixie was gone like a stone from a sling, crawling under the seats, jinking left and right.

Holly pulled up her hood and ran towards the fire exit. That's where Doodah would be going. He went this way every day. Every good criminal checks the exit routes in whatever building he visits.

Doodah was at the exit before her, crashing through the door like a dog through a hatch. All Holly could see was the blue blur of his jumpsuit.

'Target on the move,' she said, knowing her throat mike would pick up whatever she said. 'Coming your way.'

I hope, thought Holly, but she didn't say it.

In theory Doodah would make for his bolt-hole, a small storage unit over on Crystal, which was kitted out with a small cot and air-conditioning unit. When the pixie got there, Mulch would be waiting. It was a classic human hunting technique. Beat the grass and be ready when the bird flies. Of course, if you were human, you shot the bird then ate it. Mulch's method of capture was less terminal, but equally revolting.

Holly stuck close, but not too close. She could hear the pitter-patter of the pixie's tiny feet scurrying along the theatre's carpet, but she couldn't see the little fellow. She didn't want to see him. It was vital that Doodah believed he had got away, otherwise he wouldn't make for his bolt-hole. In her LEP days there would have been no need for this kind of close-up pursuit. She would have had complete access to five thousand surveillance cameras dotted throughout Haven, not to mention a hundred other gadgets and gimmicks from the LEP surveillance arsenal. Now there was just her and Mulch. Four eyes and some special dwarf talents.

The main door was still flapping when Holly reached it. Just inside, an outraged gnome was flat on his behind, covered with nettle smoothie.

'A little kid,' he complained to an usher. 'Or a pixie. It had a big head, I know that much. Hit me right in the gut.'

Holly skirted the pair, shouldering her way on to the plaza outside. Outside, relatively speaking. Everything was inside when you lived in a tunnel. Overhead, the sunstrips were set to mid-morning. She could trace Doodah's progress by the trail of chaos in his wake. The vole kiosk was overturned. Lumpy grey-green curry congealed on the flagstones. And lumpy grey-green footsteps led to the plaza's northern corner. So far, Doodah was behaving very

predictably.

Holly shouldered through the ragged line of curry customers, keeping her eyes on the pixie's footsteps.

'Two minutes,' she said, for Mulch's benefit.

There was no reply, but there shouldn't be, not if the dwarf was in position.

Doodah should take the next service alley and cut across to Crystal. Next time they were going after a gnome. Pixies were too fast. The fairy Council did not really like bounty hunters and tried to make life as difficult for them as possible. There was no such thing as a licensed firearm outside the LEP. Anyone with a weapon, without a badge, was going to prison.

Holly rounded the corner expecting to see the tail end of a pixie blur. Instead, she saw a ten-tonne yellow multi-mixer bearing down on her. Obviously, Doodah Day had finished being predictable.

'D'Arvit!' swore Holly, diving to one side. The multi-mixer's front rotor chewed through the plaza's paving, spitting it out at the rear in centimetre-perfect slabs.

She rolled into a crouch, reaching for the Neutrino blaster, which had been on her hip until recently. All she found was air.

The multimixer was swinging round for a second run, bucking and hissing like a mechanical Jurassic carnivore. Giant pistons thumped, and rotor blades carved scythe-like through whatever surface fell beneath their blades. Debris was shovelled into the machine's belly, to be processed and shaped by heated plates.

It reminds me a bit of Mulch, thought Holly. Funny what crosses your mind when your life is in danger.

She back-pedalled away from the mixer. Yes, it was big, but it was slow and unwieldy. Holly glanced upwards to the cab, and there was Doodah, expertly manipulating the gears. His hands flashed across the knobs and levers, dragging the metal behemoth towards Holly.

All around was pandemonium. Shoppers howling, emergency klaxons sounding. But Holly couldn't worry about that now. Priority one: stay alive. Terrifying as this situation might be to the general public, Holly had years of LEP training and experience. She'd

escaped the grasp of far quicker enemies than this multimixer.

As it turned out, Holly was mistaken. The multimixer was slow as a whole, but some of its parts were lightning fast. For example, the containment paddles, two three-metre high walls of steel that slotted out on either side of the front rotor to contain any debris that might be thrown up by the rotor blades.

Doodah Day, an instinctive driver of any vehicle, saw his opportunity and took it. He overrode the safety and deployed the paddles. Four pneumatic pumps instantly pressurized and literally blew the paddles into the wall on both sides of Holly. They bit deep, sinking fifteen centimetres into the stone.

Holly's confidence drained down into her boots. She was trapped with a hundred curved strip blades tearing up the ground before her.

'Wings,' said Holly, but only her LEP suit had wings, and she had given up the right to wear that.

The paddles contained the vortex created by the blades and turned it back on itself. The vibration was terrific. Holly felt her teeth shake in her gums. She could see ten of everything. Her whole world was bad reception. Beneath her feet the blades greedily chewed the pavement. Holly jumped at the left-hand paddle, but it was well lubricated and afforded her no purchase. Her luck was equally bad with the other paddle. The only other possible avenue was straight ahead, and that wasn't really an option, not with the deadly rotor waiting.

Holly shouted at Doodah, maybe her mouth formed actual words. She couldn't be certain, not with the shaking and the noise. Blades snicked through the air, grabbing for her. With each pass they tore strips from the ground beneath her feet. There wasn't much ground left. Soon she would be feeding the multimixer. She would be shredded, passed through the machine's innards and finally laid as a paving slab. Holly Short would literally be part of the city.

There was nothing to do. Nothing. Mulch was too far away to be of any assistance, and it wasn't likely that any civilian would attempt to mount a rogue mixer, even if they had known she was trapped between the paddles.

As the blades closed in, Holly gazed towards the computer-generated sky. It would have

been nice to die on the surface. Feeling the heat of the real sun warming her brow. It would have been nice.

Then the rotor stopped. Holly was sprayed with a shower of half-digested debris from the mixer's stomach. A few stone slivers scratched her skin, but that was the extent of her injury.

Holly wiped the grime from her face and looked up. Her ears rang with the engine's aftershock, and her eyes watered from the dust that settled on her like dirty snow.

Doodah peered down at her from the cab. His face was pale but fierce.

'Leave me alone!' he shouted. His voice seemed weak and tinny to Holly's damaged eardrums.

'Just leave me alone!'

And he was gone, scurrying down the access ladder, maybe heading for his bolt-hole.

Holly leaned against one of the paddles, allowing herself a moment to recover. Tiny sparks of magic blossomed on her many cuts, sealing them. Her ears popped, whined and flexed as the magic automatically targeted her eardrums. In seconds, Holly's hearing was back to normal.

She had to get out of here. And there was only one way. Over the rotor. Past the blades. Holly tipped one gingerly with a finger. A droplet of blood oozed from a tiny cut, only to be sucked back in by a blue spark of magic. Those blades would cut her to ribbons if she slipped, and there wouldn't be enough magic under the world to stitch her back together again. But the rotor was her only way out, otherwise she would have to sit it out here until LEP traffic arrived. It would be bad enough causing this kind of damage with the weight of LEP public liability insurance behind her, but as a freelancer she'd probably be thrown in jail for a couple of months while the courts decided what to charge her with.

Holly threaded her fingers between the blades, gripping the first bar on the rotor. It would be just like climbing a ladder. A very sharp, potentially fatal ladder. She stepped on a lower bar and boosted herself up. The rotor groaned and dropped fifteen centimetres. Holly held on, because it was safer than letting go. Blades quivered two centimetres from her limbs. Slow and steady. No false moves.

One bar at a time, Holly climbed the rotor. Twice a blade nicked her flesh, but the wounds were not serious and were quickly sealed by blue sparks. After a brief eternity of utter concentration, Holly pulled herself on to the hood. The bonnet was filthy and hot, but at least it wasn't sharper than a centaur's tongue.

'He went that way,' said a voice from ground level.

Holly looked down to see a large frowning gnome in a city services uniform pointing towards Crystal.

'He went that way,' repeated the gnome. 'The pixie who threw me out of my mixer.'

Holly stared at the burly public services guy. 'That tiny pixie threw *you* out?'

The gnome almost blushed. 'I was getting out anyway; he just tipped me over.' He suddenly forgot all about his embarrassment. 'Hey, aren't you Polly something? Polly Little? That's it. The LEP hero.'

Holly climbed down the cab ladder. 'Polly Little. That's me.'

Holly landed running, her boots crunching on pebbles of crushed pavement.

'Mulch,' she said. 'Doodah is coming your way. Be careful. He's a lot more dangerous than we thought.'

Dangerous? Maybe, maybe not. He hadn't killed her when he'd had the chance. It would seem that the pixie had no stomach for murder.

Doodah's stunt with the multimixer had caused chaos in the plaza. Traffic police, nicknamed Wheelies, were pouring in and civilians were pouring out. Holly counted at least six LEP traffic magna-bikes and two cruisers. She was keeping her head down, when one of the traffic officers hopped off his bike and grabbed her shoulder.

'Did you see what happened, missy?'

Missy? Holly was tempted to twist the hand on her shoulder and flip the officer into a nearby recycler. But this was not the time for outrage – she needed to redirect his attention.

'Why, thank goodness you're here, Officer,' she twittered in a voice at least an octave higher than her normal tones. 'Over there, by the multimixer. There's blood everywhere.'

'Blood!' exclaimed the Wheelie, delighted to hear it. 'Everywhere?'

‘Absolutely everywhere.’

The traffic cop dropped Holly’s shoulder. ‘Thank you, missy. I’ll handle it from here.’

He strode purposefully towards the multimixer, then turned back.

‘Excuse me, missy,’ he said, recognition glimmering in his eye, just out of reach. ‘Don’t I know you?’

But the hooded elf had disappeared.

Ah well, thought the Wheelie. I should probably go and look at the blood everywhere.

Holly ran towards Crystal Street, though she felt sure there was no need for haste. Doodah had either decided that there was too much heat on him to reveal his bolt-hole, or Mulch had him. Either way it was out of her control. Once again, she lamented the loss of LEP backup. In her Recon days, all it would have taken was a quick order into her helmet microphone, and every street in the area would be cordoned off.

She skirted a street-cleaning robot, turning on to Crystal. The narrow street was a service lane for the main shopping plaza, and consisted mostly of delivery bays. The rest of the units were rented out for storage. Holly was surprised to find Doodah directly in front of her, rummaging in his pocket, presumably for the access chip to his unit. Something must have held him up for a minute. Maybe he had ducked behind a crate to avoid the Wheelies. Whatever. She had another shot at him.

Doodah looked up, and all Holly could do was wave.

‘Morning,’ she said.

Doodah shook a tiny fist at her. ‘Don’t you have better things to do, elf? All I do is smuggle a few fish.’

The question cut Holly deeply. Was this really the best way to help the People? Surely Commander Root had wanted more from her? In the past few months she had gone from top priority surface operations, to chasing down fish smugglers in a back alley. That was quite a drop.

She showed Doodah her hands. ‘I don’t want you to get hurt, so stand perfectly still.’

Doodah chuckled. ‘Hurt? By you? Not likely.’

‘No,’ said Holly. ‘Not by me. By him.’ She pointed at the patch of mud under Doodah’s feet.

‘Him?’ Doodah looked down suspiciously, suspecting a trap. His suspicions were absolutely correct. The ground beneath his feet fizzled slightly as the surface earth shivered and bounced.

‘What?’ said Doodah, lifting one foot. He would doubtless have stepped off the patch, if he’d had time. But what happened next, happened very quickly.

The ground did more than just collapse; it was sucked from below Doodah with a sickening slurping sound. A hoop of teeth cut through the earth, followed by a huge mouth. There was a dwarf on the other end of the mouth, and he breached the ground like a dolphin jumping, driven apparently by gas from his rear end. The ring of teeth closed round Doodah, swallowing him to the neck.

Mulch Diggums, for of course it was he, settled back into his tunnel, taking the unfortunate pixie with him. Doodah, it has to be said, did not look quite so cocky as he had a second ago.

‘A d-dwarf,’ he stammered. ‘I thought your People didn’t like the law.’

‘Generally, they don’t. But Mulch is an exception. You don’t mind if he doesn’t answer you himself; he might accidentally bite your head off.’

Doodah squirmed suddenly. ‘What’s he doing?’

‘I imagine he’s licking you. Dwarf spittle hardens on contact with air. As soon as he opens his mouth, you’ll be locked up tight as a chick in an egg.’

Mulch winked at Holly. It was about as much as he could gloat at the moment, but Holly knew that he would spend the next several days boasting about his skills.

Dwarfs can tunnel through kilometres of earth. Dwarfs have jet-powered rear ends. Dwarfs can produce two litres of rock spittle every hour. What have you got? Besides a famous face that keeps blowing our cover?

Holly peered into the hole, the toe of one boot hooked over the edge. ‘OK, partner. Good job. Now, can you please spit out the fugitive.’

Mulch was happy to oblige. He hawked Doodah on to the lane’s surface, then clambered

up himself, rehingeing his jaw.

‘This is disgusting,’ moaned Doodah, as the viscous spittle solidified on his limbs. ‘It stinks too.’

‘Hey,’ said Mulch, injured. ‘The smell is not my fault. If you rented storage in a cleaner lane...’

‘Oh yeah, stinky? Well, this is what I think of you.’ Doodah attempted a pixie hex gesture, but fortunately the rock spittle froze his arm before he could complete it.

‘OK, you two. Cut it out,’ said Holly. ‘We have thirty minutes to get this little guy to the LEP before the spittle loosens up.’

Mulch peered over her shoulder towards the mouth of the lane. He turned suddenly pale underneath his coating of wet earth, and his beard hair bristled nervously.

‘You know something, partner,’ he said. ‘I don’t think we’re going to need thirty minutes.’

Holly turned away from her prisoner. There were half a dozen elves blocking the entrance to the lane. They were LEP, or something very like it. They wore plain clothes with no markings or insignia of any kind. They were official, though. The heavy artillery cradled in their elbows attested to that. Holly noticed with some relief that none of the guns were pointed at her or Mulch.

One of the elves stepped forward, popping the visor on her helmet.

‘Hello, Holly,’ she said. ‘We’ve been looking for you all morning. How’ve you been?’

Holly swallowed a relieved sigh. It was Wing Commander Vinyáya, a long-time supporter of Holly and Julius Root. Vinyáya had blazed the trail for all females in the forces. In a five-hundred-year career she had done everything from leading a Retrieval team to the dark side of the moon, to heading up the liberal vote on the fairy Council. In addition to this, she had been Holly’s flight instructor in the Academy.

‘Fine, Commander,’ said Holly.

Vinyáya nodded at the solidifying mass of rock spittle.

‘Keeping busy, I see.’

‘Yes. That’s Doodah Day. The fish smuggler. Quite a catch.’

The commander frowned. ‘You’re going to have to cut him loose, Holly. We have bigger snails to pop.’

Holly placed her boot on Doodah’s midriff. She was reluctant to jump through LEP hoops, even for an undercover wing commander.

‘What kind of snails?’

Vinyáya’s frown deepened, cutting a slash between her brows.

‘Can we talk in the car, Captain? The regulars are on the way.’

Captain? Vinyáya had referred to her by her old rank. What was going on here? If the regulars were LEP, who were these fairies?

‘I don’t trust the force as much as I used to, Commander. You need to give me something before we go anywhere.’

Vinyáya sighed. ‘Firstly, Captain, we’re not the force. Not the one you think, anyway. Secondly, you want me to give you something? I’ll give you two words. Care to hazard a guess what they are?’

Holly knew at once. She felt it.

‘Artemis Fowl,’ she whispered.

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Vinyáya. ‘Artemis Fowl. Now, are you and your partner prepared to come with us?’

‘Where are you parked?’ asked Holly.

Vinyáya and her mysterious unit obviously had a serious budget. Not only were their weapons state of the art, but their transportation was way out of the usual LEP league. Within seconds of scraping Doodah Day and slipping a tracker into his boot, Holly and Mulch were strapped into lounge seats in the back of a stretch armoured vehicle. They weren’t prisoners exactly, but Holly couldn’t help feeling that she wasn’t in control of her destiny any more.

Vinyáya took off her helmet, shaking out long silver hair. Holly was surprised.

The commander smiled. 'You like the colour? I got fed up dyeing it.'

'Yes. It suits you.'

Mulch raised a finger. 'Sorry to interrupt the salon chat, but who are you people? You're not LEP; I'll bet my bum-flap on it.'

Vinyáya swivelled to face the dwarf. 'How much do you know about demons?'

Mulch checked the vehicle's cooler and was delighted to find sim-chicken and nettle beer. He liberated both.

'Demons. Not a lot. Never seen one myself.'

'What about you, Holly? Remember anything from school?'

Holly was intrigued. Where could this conversation be going? Was this a test of some kind? She thought back to her history classes in Police Academy.

'Demons. The eighth family of the fairy People. Ten thousand years ago, after the Battle of Tailte, they refused to move underground, opting instead to lift their island out of time and live there in isolation.'

Vinyáya nodded. 'Very good. So they assembled their circle of warlocks and cast a time spell over the island of Hybras.'

'They disappeared off the face of the Earth,' recited Mulch. 'And no one's seen a demon since.'

'Not quite true. A few have popped up over the centuries. One quite recently in fact. And guess who was there to meet him?'

'Artemis,' said Holly and Mulch simultaneously.

'Exactly. Somehow he was able to predict what we couldn't. We knew when, but our where was off by several metres.'

Holly sat forward. Interested. Back in the game.

'Did we get Artemis on film?'

'Not exactly,' replied Vinyáya cryptically. 'If you don't mind, I'll leave the explaining to

someone more qualified than me. He's back at base.' And she would say no more on the subject. Most infuriating.

Mulch wasn't one for patience.

'What? You're just going to take a nap? Come on, Vinyáya, tell us what little Arty is up to.'

Vinyáya would not be drawn. 'Relax, Mister Diggums. Have another nettle beer, or some spring water.' The commander took two bottles from the cooler, offering one to Mulch.

Mulch studied the label. 'Derrier? No thanks. You know how they put the bubbles in this stuff?'

Vinyáya's mouth twitched with the ghost of a smile. 'I thought it was naturally carbonated.'

'Yeah, that's what I thought until I got a prison job at the Derrier plant. They employ every dwarf in the Deeps. They made us sign confidentiality contracts.'

Vinyáya was hooked. 'So go on, tell me. How *do* they get the bubbles in?'

Mulch tapped his nose. 'Can't say. Breach of contract. All I *can* say is it involves a huge vat of water and several dwarfs using our... er,' Mulch pointed to his rear end '... natural talents.'

Vinyáya replaced her bottle gingerly.

As Holly sat back in her comfortable gel chair, enjoying yet another of Mulch's tall tales, a niggling thought nudged through. She realized that Commander Vinyáya had avoided answering the dwarf's initial question. *Who are these people?*

Ten minutes later, that question was answered.

'Welcome to Section Eight Headquarters,' said Vinyáya. 'Forgive my theatrics; it's not often we get to *wow* people.'

Holly didn't feel very *wowed*. They had pulled into a multi-storey car park several blocks down from Police Plaza. The stretch armoured vehicle followed the curved arrows up to the seventh floor, which was stuffed below the craggy roof ceiling. The driver parked in the

least accessible, darkest space, then switched off the engine.

They sat for several seconds in the damp darkness, listening to rock-water drip from stalactites on to the roof.

‘Wow,’ said Mulch. ‘This is something. I guess you people spent all your money on the car.’

Vinyáya smiled. ‘Just wait.’

The driver ran a quick proximity scan on the dashboard scanner and came up clean. He then took an infrared remote from the dash and clicked it through the transparent plastic roof at the rock face overhead.

‘Remote-controlled rocks,’ said Mulch drily, delighted at the opportunity to exercise his sarcasm muscle.

Vinyáya did not respond – she didn’t have to. What happened next shut Mulch up all on its own. The parking space rose hydraulically, sending the car catapulting towards the rock face above. The rocks did not move out of the way. There was no doubt in Holly’s mind that when rock went up against metal, the rock would win. It made no sense, of course, that Vinyáya would bring them here only to crush the entire party. But there was no time to consider this in the half a second that it took the stretch vehicle to reach the hard, unforgiving rock.

In truth, the rock wasn’t hard or unforgiving. It was digital. They passed right through to a smaller carport, built into the rock.

‘Hologram,’ breathed Holly.

Vinyáya winked at Mulch. ‘Remote-controlled rocks,’ she said. She flipped open the rear door, stepping out into an air-conditioned corridor.

‘The entire headquarters has been hewn from the rock. Actually, most of the cave was already here. We just lasered off a corner here and there. Forgive all the cloak-and-dagger, but it’s vital that what we do here at Section Eight remains secret.’

Holly followed the commander through a set of automatic doors and down a slick corridor. There were sensors and cameras every few paces and Holly knew that her identity had been verified at least a dozen times before they reached the steel door at the end of the

corridor.

Vinyáya plunged her hand into a plate of liquid metal at the door's centre.

'Flux metal,' she explained, pulling her hand out. 'The metal is saturated with nano-sensors. There's no way to fake your way through this door. The nano-sensors read everything from my handprint to my DNA. Even if someone cut off my hand and stuck it in here, the sensors would read a lack of pulse.'

Holly folded her arms. 'All this paranoia in one place. I think I can guess who your technical consultant is.'

The door whooshed back, and standing on the other side was exactly the person Holly had expected to see.

'Foaly,' she said fondly, stepping through to embrace the centaur.

Foaly hugged her warmly, stamping his rear hooves with delight.

'Holly,' he said, holding her at arm's length. 'How have you been?'

'Busy,' replied Holly.

Foaly frowned. 'You look a little skinny.'

'Amazingly, so do you,' laughed Holly.

Foaly had lost a little weight since she had last seen him. And his coat was glossy and groomed.

Holly patted his flank. 'Hmm,' she mused. 'You're using conditioner, and you're not wearing the brain-probe-proof tinfoil hat. Don't tell me you have a little lady centaur tucked away somewhere.'

Foaly actually blushed. 'It's early days yet, but I'm hopeful.'

The room was packed from floor to ceiling with state-of-the-art electronics. In fact, some of it was in the floor and ceiling, including wall-sized gas view screens, and an incredibly realistic sim-sky overhead.

Foaly was obviously proud of what he had put together. 'Section Eight has the budget. I get the very best of everything.'

'What about your old job?'

The centaur scowled. 'I tried working for Sool, but it didn't work out. He's destroying everything Commander Root built. Section Eight headhunted me discreetly at a speed-dating weekend. They made me an offer and I accepted. I get plenty of fawning adoration here, not to mention a huge salary hike.'

Mulch had a quick nosey around and was irritated to find that there wasn't a single crumb of food in the room.

'None of that salary went on vole curry, I suppose?'

Foaly raised an eyebrow at the dwarf, who was still coated with tunnel dirt.

'No. But we do have a shower room. You do know what a shower is, don't you, Diggums?'

Mulch's beard hair bristled. 'Yes, I do. And I know a donkey when I see one too.'

Holly stepped between them. 'OK, you two. No need to take up where you left off. Let's hold off on the traditional insults until we find out where we are, and why we're here.'

Mulch lowered himself gleefully on to a cream couch, fully aware that some of his mucky coating would rub into the furniture. Holly sat beside him, but not too close.

Foaly activated a wall screen, then touched it gently to navigate to the program he wanted.

'I love these new gas screens,' he snickered. 'Electric pulses heat the particles to different temperatures, causing the gas to turn different colours, forming pictures. Of course, it's a lot more complicated than that, but I'm dumbing it down for the convict.'

'I was completely exonerated,' objected Mulch. 'As you well know.'

'The charges were dropped,' Foaly pointed out. 'You were not exonerated. It's a different thing. Slightly.'

'Yes, like a centaur and a donkey are different things. Slightly.'

Holly sighed. It was almost like old times. Foaly was the LEP technical consultant who had steered her through many operations, and Mulch was their reluctant helper. It would be difficult for a stranger to believe that the dwarf and the centaur were actually good friends. She supposed this irritating bickering was how the males of every species showed affection.

A life-size picture of a demon flashed up on the screen. Its eyes were slitted, and its ears were crowned with spikes.

Mulch jumped. 'D'Arvit!'

'Relax,' said Foaly. 'It's computer-generated. Amazing picture quality though, I grant you.' The centaur enlarged the face until it filled the screen.

'Full-grown buck demon. Post warp.'

'Post warp?'

'Yes, Holly. Demons do not grow like other fairies. They are quite cuddly until they hit puberty, then their bodies undergo a violent and painful spasm, or warp. After eight to ten hours they emerge from a cocoon of nutrient slime as demons. Before that, they are simply imps. Not the warlocks though, they never warp. Instead, their magic blossoms. I don't envy them. Instead of acne and mood swings, a pubescent warlock demon gets lightning bolts shooting out of his fingers. If he's lucky.'

'Where do they shoot out of if he's unlucky? And why do we care about any of this?' asked Mulch, cutting to the chase.

'We care because a demon popped up recently in Europe and we didn't get to him first.'

'So we heard. Demons are coming back from Hybras now?'

'Maybe, Holly.' Foaly tapped the screen, splitting it into smaller sections. Demon pictures appeared in each one. 'These demons have materialized momentarily over the past five centuries. Luckily, none of them have stayed around long enough to be captured by the Mud Men.' Foaly highlighted the fourth picture. 'My predecessor managed to hold on to this one for twelve hours. He got a silver medallion on to him, and there was a full moon.'

'That must've been a special moment,' said Mulch.

Foaly sighed. 'Didn't you learn anything in school? Demons are unique among all the creatures of the Earth. Their island, Hybras, is actually an enormous moonrock that came down in the Triassic period when the moon was hit by a meteorite. From what we can glean from fairy cave paintings and virtual models, this moonrock punched into a magma stream and more or less got itself welded to the surface. Demons are descended from lunar microorganisms that lived inside the rock. They are subject to a strong physical and mental

lunar attraction – they even levitate during the full moon. And it is this attraction which pulls them back into our dimension. They have to wear silver to repel the lunar pull. Silver is the most effective dimensional anchor. Gold works too, but sometimes you leave bits of yourself behind.’

‘So let’s say we believe all this interdimensional lunar attraction baloney,’ said Mulch, doing his utmost to wind Foaly up. ‘What has that got to do with us?’

‘It has everything to do with us,’ snapped Foaly. ‘If the humans capture a demon, who do you think will be next under their microscope?’

Vinyáya took up the backstory. ‘That is why, five hundred years ago, Council Chairman Nan Burdeh set up Section Eight to monitor demon activity. Luckily, Burdeh was a billionaire, and when she died, she left her entire fortune to Section Eight. Hence the rather impressive set-up. We are a very small, covert Council division of the LEP, but everything we have is the best. Over the years our brief has expanded to include secret missions that are too sensitive to entrust to regular LEP. But demonology is still our priority. For five centuries our finest minds have been studying the ancient demon texts, trying to predict where the next demon will pop up. Generally, our calculations are correct and we can contain the situation. But twelve hours ago something happened in Barcelona.’

‘What happened?’ asked Mulch, a reasonable question for once.

Foaly opened another box on the screen. Most of the picture was white. ‘This happened.’

Mulch peered at the box. ‘A very small snowstorm?’

Foaly wagged a finger at him. ‘I swear, if I wasn’t such a fan of mockery myself, I would have you tossed out of here on your combustible behind.’

Mulch accepted the compliment with a gracious nod.

‘No, this is not a small snowstorm. This is white-out. Someone was blocking our Scopes.’

Holly nodded. Scopes was the shop name for the shrouded trackers attached to human communications satellites.

‘You can see that whatever happened in our little snowstorm must have been pretty unusual, because the Mud Men are very eager to get away from it.’

On screen, humans outside the white-out zone ran away wildly or drove their cars into

walls.

‘Human news programmes report several sightings of a lizard-like creature appearing out of thin air for several seconds. Of course, there are no photographs. I had calculated that there would be an appearance, but more than three metres to the left, and we had set up an Eldee, sorry, Light Distortion projector accordingly. Unfortunately, although we got the time right, the exact location was wrong. Somehow, whoever was inside that ball of interference got the location exactly right.’

‘So Artemis saved us,’ noted Holly.

Vinyáya was puzzled. ‘Saved us? How?’

‘Well, if it hadn’t been for that interference, our demon friend would have been all over the Internet by now. And *you* think that Artemis was inside the ball of interference.’

Foaly grinned, obviously delighted with his own cunning. ‘Little Arty thought he could outwit me. He knows the LEP keep him under constant surveillance.’

‘Even though they promised not to,’ interjected Holly.

Foaly ignored this technicality, ploughing on. ‘So Artemis sent out decoys to Brazil and Finland, but we put a satellite on all three. Took a big chunk out of my budget, I can tell you.’

Mulch groaned. ‘I am either going to barf, or fall asleep, or both.’

Vinyáya slammed a fist into her palm. ‘Right. I’ve had enough of the dwarf. Let’s just toss him in a holding cell for a few days.’

‘You can’t do that,’ objected Mulch.

Vinyáya grinned nastily at him. ‘Oh yes I can. You wouldn’t believe the powers Section Eight has. So shut up, or listen to your own voice bouncing back at you from steel walls.’

Mulch locked his mouth and threw away the key.

‘So we know Artemis was in Barcelona,’ continued Foaly. ‘And we know a demon appeared. He was at several other possible materialization sites too, but no demons showed up. He’s involved somehow.’

‘How do we know that for sure?’ asked Holly.

‘Here’s how,’ said Foaly. He tapped the screen, enlarging a section of the Casa Milá’s roof.

Holly stared at the picture for several seconds, looking for whatever it was she was supposed to see.

Foaly gave her a hint. ‘This is a Gaudí building. You like Gaudí? He designed some lovely mosaics.’

Holly looked harder. ‘Oh my God,’ she said suddenly. ‘It can’t be.’

‘Oh, but it is,’ laughed Foaly, enlarging a particular rooftop mosaic until it filled the entire wall screen. There were two figures in the picture, stepping from a hole in the sky. One was obviously a demon, and the other was clearly Artemis Fowl.

‘But that’s impossible. That building must be a hundred years old.’

‘Time is the key to this whole thing,’ said Foaly. ‘Hybras has been lifted out of time. A demon who gets sucked off the island drifts through the centuries like a temporal nomad. This demon obviously got hold of Artemis and took him along for the ride. They must have appeared to one of Gaudí’s artists, or maybe even the man himself.’

Holly paled. ‘You mean Artemis is...’

‘No, no. Artemis is home in bed. We’ve pulled a satellite out of orbit to keep twenty-four-seven watch on him.’

‘How is this possible?’

Foaly said nothing, so Vinyáya answered the question. ‘I’ll take this one, because Foaly doesn’t like saying the words. We don’t know, Holly. This affair leaves a lot of important questions unanswered. That’s where you come in.’

‘How? I don’t know anything about demons.’

Vinyáya nodded craftily. ‘Yes, but you know a lot about Artemis Fowl. I believe you keep in touch.’

Holly shrugged. ‘Well, I wouldn’t say we really...’

Foaly cleared his throat, then called up an audio file on the system.

‘Hey, Artemis,’ said a recording of Holly’s voice. ‘I’ve got a little problem you might be

able to help me with.'

'Happy to help, Holly,' said Artemis's voice. 'Something difficult, I hope.'

'Well, there's this pixie I'm after, but he's a fast one.'

Foaly switched off the file. 'I think we can say you're in contact.'

Holly smiled sheepishly, hoping nobody would ask who gave Artemis a fairy communicator.

'OK. I call from time to time. Just to keep an eye on him. For the greater good.'

'Whatever your reasons,' said Vinyáya, 'we need you to contact him again. Go to the surface and find out how he can predict demon appearances so accurately. According to Foaly's calculations, there isn't a demon appearance due for six weeks, but we would like to know where exactly it's going to be.'

Holly took her time to think about this.

'In what capacity would I be contacting Artemis?'

'Full Captain, your old rank. Of course, now you'd be working for Section Eight. Everything you do for us would be hush-hush.'

'A spy?'

'A spy, but with excellent overtime and medical insurance.'

Holly jerked a thumb at Mulch. 'What about my partner?'

The dwarf jumped to his feet. 'I don't want to be a spy. Far too dangerous.' He winked slyly at Foaly. 'But I could be a consultant, for a fee.'

Vinyáya scowled. 'We're not prepared to grant Diggums a surface visa.'

Mulch shrugged. 'Good. I don't like the surface. It's too close to the sun and I have sensitive skin.'

'But we *are* prepared to compensate him for loss of earnings.'

'I don't know if I'm ready to put on the uniform again,' said Holly. 'I like working with Mulch.'

'Let's call this mission a probationary term. Do this one for us. See if you like the way we

operate.’

Holly mulled it over. ‘What colour is the uniform?’

Vinyáya smiled. ‘Matte black.’

‘OK,’ said Holly. ‘I’m in.’

Foaly hugged her again. ‘I knew you’d do it. I knew it. Holly Short cannot resist adventure. I told them.’

Vinyáya saluted stiffly. ‘Welcome on board, Captain Short. Foaly will complete your briefing and get you kitted out. I expect you to make contact with the subject as soon as possible.’

Holly returned the salute. ‘Yes, Commander. Thank you, Commander.’

‘Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a debriefing with a pixie we’ve managed to place inside the goblin triads. He has been wearing a scale suit for six months and he’s having a bit of an identity crisis.’

Vinyáya left, her silver mane rippling behind her. The automatic doors closed with barely a whisper.

Foaly dragged Holly from her seat.

‘I have so much to show you,’ he babbled excitedly. ‘The fairies here are nice, but a bit on the square side. Sure they ooh and aah, but no one appreciates me like you do. We have our own shuttle port, you know. And field equipment! You are not going to believe the spec. Wait until you see the new Shimmer Suit. And the helmet! Holly, this thing comes home on its own. I built a series of mini-thrusters into the skin. It can’t fly, but it can bounce wherever you want it to. The thing is beyond genius.’

Mulch covered his ears. ‘Same old Foaly. Modest to a fault.’

Foaly aimed a kick at Mulch, pulling it at the last second.

‘Keep it up, Diggums. I could snap at any moment. I am half beast, remember.’

Mulch moved the hoof away from his face with a finger. ‘I can’t help it,’ he whined. ‘All this melodrama. Someone has to poke fun.’

Foaly turned once more to his precious wall screen. He selected and enlarged an artist’s

impression of the island of Hybras.

‘I know this all sounds very cloak-and-dagger, and I know you think I’m making an anaconda out of a stinkworm. But believe me, somewhere on that island there is an unsuspecting demon who is about to make a reluctant visit to Earth and make life very difficult for us.’

Holly stepped close to the screen. Where was that reluctant demon? she wondered. And did he have any idea that he was about to be snatched from his own dimension and propelled into another?

As it happened, Holly’s questions were inaccurate on two counts. Firstly, the demon in question was not actually a demon, he was just an imp. And secondly, the *imp* in question was anything but reluctant. In fact, visiting Earth was his dearest wish.

CHAPTER 3: FIRST IMPRESSION

THE ISLAND OF HYBRAS, LIMBO



ONE night, Imp N^o1 dreamed he was a demon. He dreamed his horns were curved and pointed. His hide was coarse and armoured, and his talons were sharp enough to rip the hide from a wild boar's back. He dreamed the other demons cowered before him, then scurried away lest he injure them while in the throes of his battle spasms.

That night he dreamed this magnificent dream, then awoke to find he was still merely an imp. Of course, technically, he did not have this dream at night. The sky over Hybras is forever tinged with the red glow of dawn. But N^o1 thought of his rest period as night, even though he'd never seen one.

Imp N^o1 dressed quickly, rushing into the hallway to check his reflection in the lodge mirror, just in case he *had* warped in his sleep. But there was no change. Still the same unimpressive figure as usual. One hundred per cent imp.

'Grrr,' he said to his image. And even the N^o1 in the mirror was unconvinced. And if he couldn't scare himself, then he was not a scary creature and might as well get a job changing baby imps.

There was *some* potential in the mirror. Imp N^o1 had the general skeletal structure of a proper demon. He was about the same height as a sheep sitting on its rear. His skin was grey as moon dust and pebbled with armoured plating. Spiralling red runes wound their way round his chest, up along his neck and across his forehead. His eyes had striking orange irises, and his jaw had a noble jut about it, or so he liked to think, though others had called it protruding. He had two arms, slightly longer than an average human ten-year-old, and two legs, slightly shorter. Fingers and toes: eight of each. So nothing weird there. One tail, more of a stump, actually, but excellent for burrowing holes if you're hunting for grubs. All in all, your typical imp. But at fourteen years old, the oldest imp in Hybras. Roughly fourteen years old, that is. It was hard to be exact when it was always dawn. The

hour of power as the warlocks used to call it, before they got sucked into the depths of cold space. *The hour of power.* Very catchy.

Hadley Shrivelington Basset, a demon who was actually six months N^o1's junior, but already fully fledged, strolled down the tiled corridor on his way to the bathroom. His horns corkscrewed impressively and his ears had at least four points. Hadley enjoyed parading his new demon self in front of the imps. Generally, demons shouldn't even bunk in the imp lodge, but Basset seemed in no hurry to move out.

'Hey, imp,' he said, snapping his towel at N^o1's behind. It connected with a sharp crack. 'Are you going to warp any time soon? Maybe if I get you angry enough.'

The towel stung, but N^o1 didn't get angry. Just nervous. Everything made him nervous. That was his problem.

Time for a quick subject change. 'Morning, Basset. Nice ears.'

'I know,' said Hadley, tipping the points one after another. 'Four points already and I think there's a fifth coming up. Abbot himself only has six points.'

Leon Abbot, the hero of Hybras. The demons' self-proclaimed saviour.

Hadley snapped N^o1 again with the towel.

'Don't you get a pain in your face, looking in the mirror, imp? Because you're giving me a pain in mine.'

He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed. It was all very dramatic. You'd think there was an artist in the wings doing sketches.

'Eh, Basset. You're not wearing any silver.'

The laughing stopped, to be replaced by a froglike gurgle. Shrivelington Basset bolted down the lodge corridor without pause for more bullying. N^o1 knew scaring people half to death shouldn't give him any satisfaction, and generally it wouldn't. But for Basset, he'd make an exception. Not wearing silver on your person is much more than a fashion disaster for a demon or imp. For them it can be fatal, or worse. Painful for all eternity. This rule usually only applied by the volcano crater, but luckily Basset was too scared to remember that.

N^o1 ducked back into the senior imp dorm, hoping his room-mates were still snoring. No

such luck. They were knuckling the sleep from their eyes and already searching for the target of their daily ribbing, which was of course him. He was by far the oldest in the senior dorm – no one else had made it to fourteen without warping. It was getting to the point where he was a permanent fixture. Each night his legs protruded from the foot of the bed, and his blanket barely covered the swirling moon markings on his chest.

‘Hey, Runt,’ called one. ‘Are you going to warp today, do you think? Or will pink flowers grow out of my armpits?’

‘I’ll check your armpits tomorrow,’ sniggered another.

More abuse. This time from a couple of twelve-year-old imps who were so pumped up that they were likely to warp before class. But they were right. He would have gone for the pink flowers option too.

Runt was his imp nickname. They didn’t have real names, not until after they warped. Then they would be given a name from the sacred text. Until that moment, he was stuck with N^o1 or Runt.

He smiled good-naturedly. It didn’t pay to antagonize his dorm-mates. Even though they were smaller than him today, they could be a lot bigger tomorrow.

‘I’m feeling pumped,’ he said, flexing his biceps. ‘Today is going to be my day.’

Everyone in the dorm was excited. Tomorrow they could be out of this room for good. Once they warped they were transferred to decent accommodation and nothing in Hybras was off-limits.

‘Who do we hate?’ shouted one.

‘Humans!’ came the reply.

The next minute or so was spent howling at the ceiling. Imp N^o1 joined in, but he wasn’t really feeling it.

It shouldn’t be ‘who do we hate’, he thought. It really should be ‘whom’.

But this probably wasn’t a good time to bring that up.

Imp School

Sometimes N^o1 wished he had known his mother. This was not a very demonlike desire, so he kept it to himself. Demons were born equal, and whatever they made of themselves, they did with their claws and teeth. As soon as the female laid an egg, it was tossed in a bucket of mineral-enriched mud and left to hatch. Imps never knew who their families were, and therefore everyone was their family.

But still, some days, when his self-esteem had taken a bit of a pounding, N^o1 couldn't help gazing wistfully across at the female compound on his way to school and wondering which one was his mother.

There was one demoness with red markings like his own and a kind face. Often she smiled across the wall at him. She was looking for her son, N^o1 suddenly realized. And from that day he smiled back. They could both pretend to have found each other.

N^o1 had never experienced a feeling of belonging. He ached for the time when he could wake up and look forward to what lay ahead. That day hadn't come yet, and it wasn't likely to, not for as long as they lived in Limbo. Nothing would change. Nothing *could* change. Well, that wasn't strictly true. Things could get worse.

Imp School was a low stone building with little ventilation and hardly any light. Perfect for most imps. The stench and the smoky fire made them feel hard done by and warlike.

N^o1 longed for light and fresh air. He was uniquely different, a brand-new point on the compass. Or maybe an old one. N^o1 often thought that perhaps he could be a warlock. True, there hadn't been a warlock in the demon pride since they lifted out of time, but maybe he was the first, and that was why he felt so differently about almost everything. N^o1 had raised his theory with Master Rawley, but the teacher had cuffed his earhole and sent him digging grubs for the other imps.

There was another thing. Why couldn't they, just once, have a cooked meal? What would be so horrible about a soft stew and maybe even a few spices? Why did imps delight in chomping their food down before it stopped wriggling?

As usual, N^o1 was the last to school. The other dozen or so imps were already in the hall, revelling in the thoughts of another day spent hunting, skinning, butchering and possibly even warping. N^o1 wasn't feeling particularly hopeful. Maybe today would be his day, but he doubted it. The warp spasm was brought on by bloodlust, and N^o1 had never felt the

slightest urge to hurt any other creature. He even felt bad for the rabbits he ate and sometimes dreamed that their little spirits were haunting him.

Master Rawley sat at his bench sharpening a curved sword. Every now and then he would hack a chunk from the bench and grunt with satisfaction. The desk's surface was littered with various weapons for hacking, sawing and cutting. And, of course, one book. A copy of *Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow*. The book Leon Abbot had brought back from the old world. The book that would save them all, according to Abbot himself.

When Rawley had sharpened the blade to a silver crescent, he banged the hilt of the weapon on his bench.

'Sit down,' he roared at the imps. 'And make it fast, you shower of stinking rabbit droppings. I've got a fresh blade here that I'm just itching to test.'

The imps hurried to their places. Rawley would not cut them, but he was certainly not above strapping their backs with the flat of his sword. And then again, maybe he would cut them.

N^o1 squashed in on the end of the fourth row. *Look tough*, he told himself. *Sneer a bit. You're an imp!*

Rawley sank his blade into the wood, leaving it there quivering. The other imps grunted. Impressed. All N^o1 could think was: *Show off*. And: *He's ruined that bench*.

'So, pig slime,' said Rawley. 'You want to be demons, do you?'

'Yes, Master Rawley!' roared the imps.

'You think you have what it takes?'

'Yes, Master Rawley!'

Rawley spread his muscled arms wide. He threw back a green head and roared. 'Well then, let me hear it!'

The imps screamed and stomped, bashed their desks with weapons and clattered each other on the shoulders. N^o1 avoided as much of the consternation as possible while doing his best to seem involved. Not an easy trick.

Finally, Rawley settled them down. 'Well, we'll see. This morning is a big morning for

some of you, but for others it will be just one more day of dishonour, grub-hunting with the females.’ He stared pointedly at N^o1. ‘But before we get to oozing, we have to do some snoozing.’

Much groaning from the imps.

‘That’s right, girls. History time. Nothing to kill and nothing to eat, just knowledge for the sake of it.’ Rawley shrugged his giant knotted shoulders. ‘It’s a waste of time, if you ask me. But I’m under orders here.’

‘That’s right, Master Rawley,’ said a voice from the doorway. ‘You’re under orders.’

The voice belonged to Leon Abbot himself, paying one of his surprise visits to the school. Abbot was immediately surrounded by adoring imps, clamouring to receive a friendly cuff on the ear, or to touch his sword.

Abbot endured this adoration for a moment, then brushed the imps aside. He elbowed Rawley out of the prime spot at the head of the class, then waited for silence. He didn’t have to wait long. Abbot was an impressive specimen, even if you didn’t know a thing about his past. He was almost five feet tall, with curved ram horns that jutted from his forehead. His armoured scales were deep red and covered his entire torso and forehead. Very impressive, and of course difficult to penetrate. You could bash away with an axe all day at Abbot’s chest and get nowhere. Indeed, one of his party tricks was to challenge anyone in the room to hurt him.

Abbot threw back his rawhide cloak and slapped his chest.

‘Right, who wants to have a go?’

Several imps nearly warped right then and there.

‘Make a line, ladies,’ said Rawley, as if he was still in control.

The imps piled to the head of the class, hammering Abbot with fist, foot and forehead. They bounced off, every one. Much to Abbot’s amusement.

Idiots, thought N^o1. As if they could possibly succeed.

Actually, N^o1 had a theory about armoured scales. A few years ago he had been toying with a discarded baby armoured scale and he’d noticed that they were made of dozens of layers, which made them almost impossible to breach head on, whereas if you went at

them at an angle with something hot...

‘What about you, Runt?’

The raucous laughter of his classmates stomped all over N^o1’s thoughts.

N^o1 physically twitched with shock as he realized that not only had Leon Abbot spoken to him, he had actually used his dormitory nickname.

‘Yessir, pardon me? What?’

Abbot thumped his own chest. ‘You think you can get through the thickest plates on Hybras?’

‘I doubt they’re the thickest,’ said N^o1’s mouth, before his brain had a chance to catch up.

‘Raahhr!’ roared Abbot, or something similar. ‘Are you insulting me, impling?’

Being called *impling* was even worse than being called Runt. The term ‘impling’ was generally reserved for the recently hatched.

‘No, no, of course not, Master Abbot. I just thought that, naturally, some of the older demons would have more layers on their scales. But yours are probably tougher – no dead layers on the inside.’

Abbot’s slitted eyes squinted at N^o1. ‘You seem to know a lot about scales. Why don’t you try to get through these?’

N^o1 tried to laugh it off. ‘Oh, I really don’t think...’

But Abbot wasn’t even smiling. ‘I really *do* think, Runt. Get your stumpy tail up here before I give Master Rawley licence to do what he has wanted to do for a long time.’

Rawley pulled his blade from the bench and winked at N^o1. This was not a friendly you-and-I-share-a-secret wink; it was a let’s-see-what-colour-your-insides-are wink.

N^o1 sloped reluctantly to the head of the class, passing the smouldering embers of last night’s fire. Wooden meat skewers jutted from the coals. N^o1 paused for a beat, gazing at the sharp skewers. Thinking that if he had the guts, one of those would probably do the trick.

Abbot followed his gaze. ‘What? You think a meat skewer is going to help you?’ The demon snorted. ‘I was buried in molten lava once, Runt, and I’m still here. Bring one up. Do

your worst.'

'Do your worst,' echoed several of N°1's classmates, their loyalties obvious.

N°1 reluctantly selected a wooden needle from the fire. The handle was solid enough, but the tip was black and flaky. N°1 tapped the skewer against his leg to dislodge loose ash.

Abbot grabbed the meat skewer from N°1's hand, holding it aloft.

'This is your chosen weapon,' he said mockingly. 'The Runt thinks he's hunting rabbits.'

The jeers and hoots broke over N°1's furrowed brow like a wave. He could feel one of his headaches coming on. He could always count on one to show up just when it was least wanted.

'This is probably a bad idea,' he admitted. 'I should just pound on your armoured plates like those other morons... I mean, my classmates.'

'No, no,' said Abbot, handing back the skewer. 'You go ahead, little bee, prick me with your sting.'

Prick me with your sting, warbled N°1 in a highly insulting imitation of the pride leader. Of course, he didn't warble this aloud. N°1 was rarely confrontational outside his head.

Aloud he said, 'I'll do my best, Master Abbot.'

'I'll do my best, Master Abbot,' warbled Abbot in a highly insulting imitation of Imp N°1, as loudly as he could.

N°1 felt beads of sweat spiral down his stumpy tail. There really was no good way out of this situation. If he failed, then he was in for another bout of jeering and mild personal injury. But if he won, then he *really* lost.

Abbot knocked on the crown of his head. 'Hello, Runt. Let's get moving. There are imps here waiting to warp.'

N°1 stared at the tip of the skewer and allowed the problem to take over. He placed the flat of his right hand on Abbot's chest. Then, wrapping his fingers tightly round the thick end, he twisted the skewer upwards into one of Abbot's armoured scales.

He twisted slowly, concentrating on the point of contact. The scale greyed slightly with ash, but no penetration. Acrid smoke twirled round the skewer.

Abbot chuckled, delighted. ‘Trying to start a fire there, Runt? Should I summon the water brigade?’

One of the imps threw his lunch at N^o1. It slid down the back of his head. A lump of fat, bone and gristle.

N^o1 persisted, rolling the skewer between thumb and forefinger. He rolled faster now, feeling the skewer take hold, burning a slight indent.

N^o1 felt an excitement build in him. He tried to contain it, think about consequences, but he couldn’t. He was on the point of success here. He was just about to accomplish with brains something all these other idiots couldn’t do with brawn. Of course, they would pummel him, and Abbot would invent some excuse to undermine his achievement, but N^o1 would know. And so would Abbot.

The skewer penetrated, just a fraction. N^o1 felt the plate give way, perhaps a single layer. The little imp felt something he had never felt before. Triumph. The feeling built inside him, irresistible, unquenchable. It became more than a feeling. It transformed into a force, rebuilding some forgotten neural pathways, releasing an ancient energy inside N^o1.

What’s happening? wondered N^o1. *Should I stop? Can I stop?*

Yes and *no* were the answers to those questions. Yes, he should stop, but no, he couldn’t. The force flowed through his limbs, raising his temperature. He heard voices chanting inside his mind. N^o1 realized that he was chanting with them. Chanting what? He had no idea, but somehow his memory knew.

The strange force throbbed in N^o1’s fingers, in time with his heartbeat, then pulsed out of his body into the skewer. The pin turned to stone. Wood morphed to granite before his eyes. The rock virus spread along the shaft, rippling like water. In the flash of a spark, the skewer was completely made of stone. It expanded slightly into the breach in Abbot’s armoured plate.

The expansion cracked the plate open a couple of centimetres. Abbot heard the noise; so did everybody else. The demon pride leader flicked his eyes downwards and realized instantly what was going on.

‘Magic,’ he hissed. The word was out before he could stop it. With a vicious swipe, he

swatted the skewer away from his torso, into the fire.

N^o1 stared at his throbbing hand. Power still shimmered around his fingertips, a tiny heat haze.

‘Magic?’ he repeated. ‘That means I must be a...’

‘Shut your stupid mouth,’ snapped Abbot, covering the cracked scale with his cloak. ‘Obviously, I don’t mean actual magic. I mean trickery. You twist the handle on that skewer to make it crack, then you *ooh* and *aah* as though you have actually achieved something.’

N^o1 pulled at Abbot’s cloak. ‘But your scale?’

Abbot drew the cloak tighter. ‘What about my scale? There’s not a mark on it. Not so much as a smear. You believe me, don’t you?’

N^o1 sighed. This was Leon Abbot; the truth meant nothing. ‘Yes, Master Abbot. I believe you.’

‘I can tell by your insolent tone that you do not. Very well, proof then.’ Abbot whipped back his cloak, revealing an unblemished scale. For a moment, N^o1 thought he saw a blue spark playing about where the mark had definitely been, but then the spark winked itself out. Blue sparks. Could it be magic?

Abbot jabbed the imp’s chest with a rigid finger. ‘We’ve talked about this, Number One. I know you think you’re a warlock. But there are no warlocks; there haven’t been since we lifted out of time. You are not a warlock. Forget that idiotic notion and concentrate on warping. You’re a disgrace to your race.’

N^o1 was about to risk a protest, when he was grabbed roughly by the arm.

‘You slippery little snail,’ shouted Rawley, spittle spattering N^o1’s face. ‘Trying to trick the pride leader. Get back to your place. I’ll deal with you later.’

N^o1 could do nothing but return to the bench and bear the insults of his classmates. And there were plenty of those, usually accompanied by a missile or blow. But somehow N^o1 ignored these latest humiliations, staring instead at his own hand. The one that had turned wood to stone. Could it be true? Could he actually be a warlock? And if he was, would that make him feel better, or worse?

A toothpick bounced off his forehead on to the bench. There was a sliver of grey meat

stuck to the end. N°1 glanced up to find Rawley grinning at him.

‘Been trying to get that out for weeks. Wild boar, I think. Now, pay attention, Runt; Master Abbot is trying to educate you.’

Oh yes, the history lesson. It was amazing how much Leon Abbot managed to insert himself into demon history. To hear him tell it, you would think that he had single-handedly saved the eighth family, in spite of the meddling warlocks.

Abbot studied the hooked talons on his fingertips. Each one could gut a large pig. If Abbot’s own stories were true, he had warped at age eight while wrestling one of the island’s wild dogs. His fingernails had actually changed into talons during the fight, lacerating the dog’s side.

N°1 found this story highly unlikely. It took hours to warp fully, sometimes days, but Abbot expected them to believe that *his* warp was instantaneous. Hogwash. And yet all the other imps lapped up these self-glorifying legends.

‘Of all the demons who fought in the last battle at Tailte,’ droned Abbot, in what he probably thought was a good voice for history lessons, but in what N°1 thought was a boring enough voice to turn soft cheese hard. ‘I, Leon Abbot, am the last.’

Convenient, thought N°1. *Nobody left around to argue*. He also thought: *You look your age, Leon. Too many barrels of pork fat*.

N°1 was an uncharitable imp when in a bad mood.

It is the nature of *out of time* spells that the ageing process is drastically slowed. Abbot had been a young buck when the warlocks lifted Hybras out of time, and so the spell, combined with good genes, had kept him and his huge ego alive ever since. Possibly a thousand years. Of course, that was a thousand years’ normal time. In Hybras time, a millennium meant very little. A couple of centuries could skip by in the blink of an eye on the island. An imp could wake up one morning to find that he’d evolved. A while back, every demon and imp in Hybras got up one morning with a stubby tail where his magnificent long one used to be. For a considerable time after that, the most common noises on the island were the sounds of demons falling down, or swearing as they got up again.

‘After that great battle, in which the demon battalions were the bravest and fiercest in

the People's army,' continued Abbot, to hoots of approval from the imps, 'we were defeated by treachery and cowardice. The elves would not fight, and the dwarfs would not dig traps. We had no choice but to cast our spell and regroup until the time was right to return.'

More hooting, plus stamping of feet.

Every time, thought N^o1. Do we have to go through this every time? These imps act like they never heard this story before. When is someone going to stand up and say: 'Excuse me. Old news. Move on.'

'And so we breed. We breed and grow strong. Now our army has over five thousand warriors – surely enough to defeat the humans. I know this because I, Leon Abbot, have been to the world and returned to Hybras alive.'

This was Abbot's golden nugget. This was where anyone who stood against him withered and blew away. Abbot had not come directly to Limbo with the rest of Hybras. For some reason he had been diverted to the human future, then sucked across to Hybras. He had seen the human camps and actually brought his knowledge home. How all this happened was a bit hazy. According to Abbot there had been a great battle, he'd defeated fifty or so men, then a mysterious warlock had lifted him out of time again. But not before he'd grabbed a couple of things to bring back.

Since the warlocks had been explosively removed from the eighth family, nobody had much of a clue about magic any more. Normal demons had no magic of their own. It had been thought that all the warlocks had been sucked into space during the transferral of Hybras from Earth to Limbo, but according to Abbot, one had survived. This warlock was in league with the humans and had only helped the demon leader under threat of grievous injury.

N^o1 was highly sceptical of this version of events. First of all because it came from Abbot, and secondly because warlocks were being cast, once more, in a bad light. Demons seemed to forget that if it wasn't for the warlocks, Hybras would have been overrun by humans.

On this particular day, N^o1 was feeling a special attachment to the warlocks, and he did not appreciate their memory being sullied by this loudmouth braggart. Hardly a day went past where N^o1 did not spend a moment praying for the return of the mysterious warlock who had helped Abbot. And now that he was certain of magic in his own blood, N^o1 would

pray all the harder.

‘The moon separated me from the rest of the island during the great journey,’ continued Abbot, his eyes half closed as if the memory had him in a swoon. ‘I was powerless to resist her charms. And so I travelled through space and time until I came to rest in the new world. Which is now the world of men. The humans clamped silver on my ankles, tried to make me submit, but I would not.’ Abbot hunched his massive shoulders and roared at the roof. ‘For I am demonkind! And we will never submit!’

Needless to say the imps went into overdrive. The entire room heaved with their exertions. In N^o1’s opinion, Abbot’s entire performance was wooden, to say the least. The *we will never submit* speech was the oldest page in Abbot’s book. N^o1 rubbed his temples, trying to ease the headache. There was worse to come, he knew. First the book, then the crossbow, if Abbot didn’t deviate from the script. And why would he? He hadn’t in all the years since his return from the new world.

‘And so I fought!’ shouted Abbot. ‘I kicked off their shackles and Hybras called me home; but before I took my leave of the hated humans, I fought my way to their altar and stole away with two of their blessed objects.’

‘The book and the bow,’ muttered N^o1, rolling his orange eyes.

‘Tell us what you stole,’ begged the others on cue, as if they didn’t know.

‘The book and the bow!’ proclaimed Leon Abbot, pulling the objects from beneath his robe, as if by magic.

As if by magic, thought N^o1. But not actual magic, because then Abbot would be a warlock, and he couldn’t possibly be a warlock as he had already warped and warlocks did not warp.

‘Now we know how the humans think,’ said Abbot, waving the book. ‘And how they fight,’ he proclaimed, brandishing the crossbow.

I don’t believe any of this for a minute, thought N^o1. Or I wouldn’t, if we had ‘minutes’ in Limbo. Oh, how I wish I was on Earth, with the last warlock. Then there would be two of us, and I would find out what really happened when Leon Abbot came calling.

‘And armed with this knowledge, we can return when the time spell fades and retake the old country.’

‘When?’ cried the imps. ‘When?’

‘Soon,’ replied Abbot. ‘Soon. And there will be humans enough for us all. They will be crushed like the grass beneath our boots. We will tear their heads off like dandelion flowers.’

Oh, please, thought N^o1. *Enough plant similes.*

It was quite possible that N^o1 was the only creature on Hybras who ever even thought the human word ‘simile’. Saying it aloud would have certainly earned him a thrashing. If the other imps knew that his human vocabulary also included words like ‘grooming’ and ‘decoration’ they would string him up for sure. Ironically, he had learned these words from *Lady Heatherington Smythe’s Hedgerow*, which was supposed to be a school text.

‘Tear their heads off,’ shouted one imp, and it quickly became a chant, taken up by everyone in the room.

‘Yes, tear their heads off,’ said N^o1, trying it out, but there was no feeling in his voice.

What’s my motivation? he wondered. *I’ve never even met a human.*

The imps climbed on their benches, bobbing in primal rhythm.

‘Tear their heads off! Tear their heads off!’

Abbot and Rawley urged them on. Flexing their claws and howling. A sickly sweet smell clogged the air. Warp muck. Someone was entering the warp spasm phase. The excitement was bringing on the change.

N^o1 felt nothing. Not so much as a twinge. He tried his best, squeezing his eyelids together, letting the pressure build in his head, thinking bloody thoughts. But his true feelings shattered the false visions of bloodlust and carnage.

It’s no use, he thought. *I am not that kind of demon.*

N^o1 stopped chanting and sat, head in hands. No point in pretending – another change cycle was passing him by.

Not so the other imps. Abbot’s theatrics had opened a natural well of testosterone, bloodlust and bodily fluid. One by one, they succumbed to the warp spasm. Green gunge flowed from their pores, slowly at first, then in bubbling gushes. They all went under, every

one of them. It must be some kind of record, so many imps warping simultaneously. Of course, Abbot would take the credit.

The sight of the fluid brought on fresh rounds of howling. And the more the imps howled, the faster the gunge spurted. N^o1 had heard it said that humans took several years to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Imps did it in a few hours. And a change like that is going to hurt.

The howls of exultation changed to grunts of pain, as bones stretched and horns curled, the gunge-coated limbs already lengthening. The smell was sweet enough to make N^o1 gag.

Imps toppled to the floor all around. They thrashed for a few seconds, then their own fluids mummified them. They were cocooned like enormous green bugs, strapped tight by the hardening gunge. The schoolroom was suddenly silent, except for the crack of drying nutrient fluid and a rustle of flames from the stone fireplace.

Abbot beamed, a toothy smile that seemed to split his head in half.

‘A good morning’s work, wouldn’t you say, Rawley? I got them all warping.’

Rawley grunted his agreement, then noticed N^o1. ‘Except the Runt.’

‘Well, of course not,’ began Abbot, then caught himself. ‘Yes. Absolutely, except the Runt.’

N^o1’s forehead burned under Rawley and Abbot’s scrutiny.

‘I want to warp,’ he said, looking at his fingers. ‘I really do. But it’s the hating thing. I just can’t manage it. And all that slime. Even the thought of that stuff all over me makes me feel a bit nauseous.’

‘A bit what?’ said Rawley suspiciously.

N^o1 realized that he needed to dumb it down for his teacher.

‘Sick. A bit sick.’

‘Oh.’ Rawley shook his head in disgust. ‘Slime makes you sick? What kind of imp are you? The others live for slime.’

N^o1 took a deep breath and said something aloud that he had known for a long time.

‘I’m not like the others.’ N^o1’s voice trembled. He was on the verge of tears.

‘Are you going to cry?’ asked Rawley, his eyes bugging. ‘This is too much, Leon. He’s going to cry now, just like a female. I give up.’

Abbot scratched his chin. ‘Let me try something.’

He rummaged in a cape pocket, surreptitiously fixing something over his hand.

Oh no, thought N^o1. *Please no. Not Stony.*

Abbot raised a forearm, his cloak draped over it. A mini-stage. A puppet human poked his head over the leather cape. The puppet’s head was a grotesque ball of painted clay, with a heavy forehead and clumsy features. N^o1 doubted that humans were this ugly in real life, but demons were not known for their artistic skills. Abbot often produced Stony as a visual incentive for those imps who were having difficulty warping. Needless to say, N^o1 had been introduced to the puppet before.

‘Grrr,’ said the puppet, or rather Abbot said, as he waggled the puppet. ‘Grrr, my name is Stony the Mud Man.’

‘Hello, Stony,’ said N^o1 weakly. ‘How’ve you been?’

The puppet held a tiny wooden sword in its hand.

‘Never mind how I’ve been. I don’t care how you’ve been, because I hate all fairies,’ said Abbot in a squeaky voice. ‘I drove them from their homes. And if they ever try to come back, I will kill them all.’

Abbot lowered the puppet. ‘Now, how does that make you feel?’

It makes me feel that the wrong demon is in charge of the pride, thought N^o1, but aloud he said, ‘Eh, angry?’

Abbot blinked. ‘Angry? Really?’

‘No,’ confessed N^o1, wringing his hands. ‘I don’t feel anything. It’s a puppet. I can see your fingers through the material.’

Abbot stuffed Stony back in his pocket.

‘That’s it. I’ve had it with you, Number One. You will never earn a name from the book.’

Once demons warped, they were given a human name from *Lady Heatherington Smythe’s Hedgerow*. The logic being that learning the human language and possessing a human

name would help the demon army think like humans and therefore defeat them. Abbot may have hated the Mud Men, but that wasn't to say he didn't admire them. Also, politically, it was a good idea to have every demon on Hybras calling each other by names that Leon Abbot had procured for them.

Rawley grabbed N^o1's ear, dragging him from his seat to the rear of the classroom. A metal grille on the floor covered a shallow, pungent dung pit.

'Get to work, Runt,' he said gruffly. 'You know what to do.'

N^o1 sighed. He knew only too well. This wasn't the first or second time he'd had to endure this odious task. He hefted a long-handled gaff from a peg on the wall, pulling the heavy grille from its groove. The smell was rank but not unbearable, as a crust had formed on the dung's surface. Beetles crawled across the craggy skin, their legs clicking like claws on wood.

N^o1 uncovered the pit completely, then selected his nearest classmate. There was no way of telling which classmate it actually was because of the slime cocoon. The only movements were small air bubbles around the mouth and nose. At least he hoped it was the mouth and nose.

N^o1 bent low, rolling the cocoon along the floor and into the dung pit. The warping imp crashed through the crust, taking a dozen beetles with him into the muck below. A gush of dung stink washed over N^o1, and he knew his skin would smell for days. The others would wear their pit stink proudly, but for N^o1 it was just another badge of shame.

It was arduous work. Not all the warping imps were still. Several struggled inside their cocoons, and twice demon claws punctured the green chrysalis centimetres from N^o1's skin.

He persisted, groaning loudly, in the hope that Rawley or Leon Abbot would lend a hand. It was a vain hope. The two demons were huddled at the head of the classroom, poring over *Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow*.

Eventually, N^o1 rolled his last classmate into the dung pit. They were piled in there like meat in a thick stew. The nutrient-rich dung would accelerate their warp, ensuring they reached full potential. N^o1 sat on the stone floor, catching his breath.

Lucky you, thought N^o1. Dunked in dung.

Nº1 tried to feel envious. But even being near the pit made him gag; the thought of being immersed in it, surrounded by cocooned imps, made his stomach churn.

A shadow fell across the flagstones before him, flickering in the firelight.

‘Ah, Number One,’ said Abbot. ‘Always an imp, never a demon, eh? What am I going to do with you?’

Nº1 stared at his own feet, clicking baby talons on the floor.

‘Master Abbot, sir. Don’t you think? Isn’t there the tiniest chance?’ He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet Abbot’s. ‘Couldn’t I be a warlock? You saw what happened with the skewer. I don’t want to embarrass you, but you saw it.’

Abbot’s expression changed instantly. One second he was playing the genial master, the next his true colours shone through.

‘I saw nothing,’ he hissed, heaving Nº1 to his feet. ‘Nothing happened, you odious little freak of nature. The skewer was coated with ash, nothing more. There was no transformation. No magic.’

Abbot drew Nº1 close enough to see the slivers of trapped meat between his yellowed teeth. The next time he spoke, his voice seemed different somehow. Layered. As though an entire choir was singing in harmony. It was a voice that could not be ignored. Magical?

‘If you are a warlock, then you should really be on the other side, with your relative. Wouldn’t that be for the best? One quick leap, that’s all it would take. Do you understand what I am saying to you, Runt?’

Nº1 nodded, dazed. What a lovely voice. Where had that come from? The other side, of course; that’s where he should go. One small step for an imp.

‘I understand, sir.’

‘Good. The subject is closed. As Lady Heatherington Smythe would say, “Best foot forward, young sir, the world awaits.”’

Nº1 nodded, just as he knew Abbot wanted him to, but inside his brain churned along with his stomach. Was this to be the whole extent of his life? Forever mocked, forever different. Never a moment of light or hope. Unless he crossed over.

Abbot's suggestion was his only hope. *Cross over.* N°1 had never seen the appeal of jumping into a crater before, but now the notion seemed nigh on irresistible. He was a warlock; there couldn't be any doubt. And somewhere out there, in the human world, there was another like him. An ancient brother who could teach him the ways of his kind.

N°1 watched Abbot stride away from him. Off to exercise his power on some other part of the island, possibly by belittling the females in the compound – another of his favourite pastimes. Then again, how bad could Abbot be? After all, he had given N°1 this wonderful idea.

I cannot stay here, thought N°1. I must go to the volcano.

The notion took firm hold of his brain. And in minutes it had drowned out all the other notions in his head.

Go to the volcano.

It pounded inside his skull, like waves breaking on the shore.

Obey Abbot. Go to the volcano.

N°1 brushed the dust from his knees.

'You know what,' he muttered to himself in case Rawley could hear, 'I think I'm going to the volcano.'

CHAPTER 4: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

THE MASSIMO BELLINI THEATRE, CATANIA, EASTERN SICILY



ARTEMIS Fowl and his bodyguard, Butler, relaxed in a private box at the stage-left side of Sicily's world-famous Massimo Bellini Theatre. Perhaps it is not altogether accurate to say Butler *relaxed*. Rather he *appeared* to relax, as a tiger appears to relax in the moment before it strikes.

Butler was even less happy here than he had been in Barcelona. At least for the Spain trip he'd had a few days to prepare, but for this jaunt he barely had time to catch up on his martial arts routines.

As soon as the Fowl Bentley had pulled up at Fowl Manor, Artemis had disappeared into his study, firing up his computers. Butler took the opportunity to work out, freshen up and prepare dinner: onion marmalade tartlets, rack of lamb with garlic gratin and a red berries crêpe to finish.

Artemis broke the news over coffee.

'We need to go to Sicily,' he said, toying with the biscotti on his saucer. 'I made a breakthrough on the time spell figures.'

'How soon?' asked the bodyguard, mentally listing his contacts on the Mediterranean island.

Artemis looked at his Rado watch and Butler moaned.

'Don't check your watch, Artemis. Check the calendar.'

'Sorry, old friend. But you know time is limited. I can't risk missing a materialization.'

'But on the jet you said that there wasn't another materialization due for six weeks.'

'I was wrong, or rather, Foaly was wrong. He missed a few new factors in the temporal equation.'

Artemis had filled Butler in on the eighth family details as the jet soared over the English Channel.

‘Allow me to demonstrate,’ said Artemis. He put a silver salt cellar on his plate, ‘Let us say that this salt cellar is Hybras. My plate is where it is: our dimension. And your plate is where it wants to go: Limbo. With me so far?’

Butler nodded reluctantly. He knew that the more he understood, the more Artemis would tell him, and there wasn’t much space in a bodyguard’s head for quantum physics.

‘So, the demon warlocks wanted to move the island from plate A to plate B, but not through space, through time.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘It’s all in the fairy Book,’ replied the Irish teenager. ‘Quite a detailed description, if a bit flowery.’

The Book was the fairy Bible, containing their history and commandments. Artemis had managed to obtain a copy from a drunken sprite in Ho Chi Minh City years earlier. It was proving to be an invaluable source of information.

‘I doubt the Book has too many charts and graphs,’ noted Butler.

Artemis smiled. ‘No, I got the specifics from Foaly, not that he knows he’s sharing information.’

Butler rubbed his temples. ‘Artemis. I warned you not to mess with Foaly. The decoy thing is bad enough.’

Artemis was fully aware that Foaly was tracking him and any decoys he sent out. In fact, he only sent out the decoys to make Foaly dip into his funds. It was his idea of a joke.

‘I didn’t initiate the surveillance,’ objected Artemis. ‘Foaly did. I found over a dozen devices on my computers alone. All I did was reverse the spike to get into some of his shared files. Nothing classified. Well, maybe a few. Foaly’s been busy since he left the LEP.’

‘So, what did Foaly’s files tell you?’ said Butler resignedly.

‘They told me about magic. Basically, magic is energy and the ability to manipulate energy. To move Hybras from A to B, the demon warlocks harnessed the power of their volcano to create a time rent or tunnel.’ Artemis rolled his napkin into a tube, popped the

salt cellar into it and deposited the cellar on Butler's plate.

'Simple as that?' said Butler doubtfully.

'Not really,' said Artemis. 'In fact, the warlocks did an exceptional job, considering the instruments available to them at the time. They had to calculate the power of the volcano, the size of the island, the energy of each individual demon on the island, not to mention the reverse pull of lunar attraction. It's amazing the spell worked as well as it did.'

'There was a glitch?'

'Yes. According to the Book, the warlocks induced the volcano, but the force was too strong. They couldn't control it and the magic circle was broken. Hybras and the demons were transported, but the warlocks were blasted into space.'

Butler whistled. 'That's quite a glitch.'

'It's more than a glitch. The demon warlocks were all killed, so now the rest of the pride are stuck in Limbo, held by a magical spell that was never meant to be permanent, without a warlock to bring them back.'

'Couldn't Foaly go and get them?'

'No. It would be an impossible mission to recreate the same circumstances. Imagine trying to steer a feather in a sandstorm, then land the feather on a particular grain of sand, except you don't know where the grain is. And even if you did know where the grain was, demon magic can only be controlled by a demon. They are by far the most powerful of warlocks.'

'Tricky,' admitted Butler. 'So, tell me why these demons are popping up here, now?'

Artemis corrected him with a wagging finger. 'Not just here, and not just now. The demons have always felt an attraction to their home world, a combination of lunar and terrestrial radiations. But a demon could only be pulled back if he was at his end of the time-tunnel mouth, the crater, and not wearing a dimensional anchor.'

Butler fingered his wristband. 'Silver.'

'That's right. Now, because of massively increased radiation levels worldwide, the pull on demons is much stronger and reaches critical level with greater frequency.'

Butler was struggling to keep up. Sometimes it was not easy being a genius's bodyguard.

‘Artemis, I thought we weren’t going into specifics.’

Artemis continued regardless. He was hardly going to stop now, in mid-lecture.

‘Bear with me, old friend. Nearly there. So now, energy spikes occur more often than Foaly thinks.’

Butler raised a finger. ‘Ah yes, but the demons are OK as long as they stay away from the crater.’

Artemis raised a triumphant finger. ‘Yes!’ he crowed. ‘That’s what you would think. That’s what Foaly thinks. But when our last demon was off course, I ran the equation from back to front. My conclusion is that the time spell is decaying. The tunnel is unravelling.’

Artemis allowed the napkin tube to widen in his hand. ‘Now the catchment area is bigger, as is the deposit area. Pretty soon, demons won’t be safe anywhere on Hybras.’

Butler asked the obvious question. ‘What happens when the tunnel decays altogether?’

‘Just before that happens, demons all over Hybras will be plucked off the island, silver or no silver. When the tunnel collapses, some will be deposited on earth, more on the moon and the rest scattered through space and time. One thing is for sure, not many of them will survive, and those that do will be locked up in laboratories and zoos.’

Butler frowned. ‘We need to tell Holly about this.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Artemis. ‘But not just yet. I need one more day to confirm my figures. I’m not going to Foaly with nothing but theory.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ said Butler. ‘Sicily, right?’

So now they were in the Massimo Bellini Theatre, and Butler had barely half an idea why they were there. If a demon materialized on that stage, then Artemis was right and the fairy People were in major trouble. And if the fairies were in trouble, then it was up to Artemis to help them. Butler was actually quite proud that his young charge was doing something for somebody else for a change. Even so, they had only a week to complete their task and return to Fowl Manor, because in seven days Artemis’s parents returned from Rhode Island where Artemis Fowl Senior had finally taken possession of an artificial bio-hybrid leg, to replace the one he had lost when the Russian Mafiya blew up his ship.

Butler peered out of the box at the hundreds of golden arches and the thirteen hundred-odd people enjoying the evening's performance of Bellini's *Norma*.

'First a Gaudí building, now this theatre,' commented the bodyguard, his words audible only to Artemis, thanks to their box's isolation and the booming volume of the opera. 'Don't these demons ever materialize somewhere quiet?'

Artemis replied in a whisper. 'Just let the sublime music flow over you; enjoy the show. Don't you know how difficult it is to get a box for a Vincenzo Bellini opera? Especially *Norma*. *Norma* combines the requirements of both a coloratura and a dramatic soprano. And the soprano is excellent, comparable to Callas herself.'

Butler grunted. Perhaps it was difficult for *ordinary* people to get a box in the theatre, but Artemis had simply called his billionaire environmentalist friend Giovanni Zito. The Sicilian had gladly surrendered his own box, in exchange for two cases of the finest Bordeaux. Hardly surprising since Artemis had recently invested over ten million euros in Zito's water purification research.

A Sicilian drinking Bordeaux? Artemis had chuckled down the phone. *You should be ashamed of yourself.*

'Keep your watch pointed at the stage,' directed Artemis, interrupting Butler's thoughts. 'The chances are minuscule that a demon will be caught without silver, even away from the crater, but if one does show up, I want it on film to prove to Foaly that my theory is correct. If we don't have incontrovertible proof, the fairy Council will never take action.'

Butler checked that his watch crystal that doubled as a camera lens was angled towards the stage. 'The camera is fine, but if you don't mind I won't be letting the sublime music flow over me. I have enough to do keeping you safe.'

The Bellini Theatre was a bodyguard's nightmare. Multiple entrances and exits, over a thousand patrons that refused to be frisked, hundreds of golden arches that could conceal a gunman and countless nooks, crannies and corridors that probably didn't appear on the theatre plan. Nevertheless, Butler was reasonably confident that he had done all he could to protect Artemis.

Of course, there were certain things that bodyguards could not guard against, as Butler was about to find out. Invisible things.

Artemis's phone vibrated gently. Usually, Artemis deplored the kind of person who kept their phone on during a performance, but this phone was special and he never turned it off. It was the fairy communicator given to him by Holly Short, plus a few modifications and add-ons made by Artemis himself.

The phone was the size and shape of a two-euro coin, with a pulsing red crystal at its centre. This was a fairy omni-sensor, which could interface with any communications system, including the human body. The phone was disguised as a rather ostentatious ring on Artemis's middle finger. Artemis twisted the ring so that the phone sat on his palm, then closed his middle fingers, extending his thumb and little finger. The sensor would decode vibrations in his little finger and send them as voice patterns. It would also use the bones in his hand to transmit the caller's voice to the tip of his thumb.

Artemis looked for all the world like a young boy talking on an imaginary phone.

'Holly?' he said.

Butler watched as Artemis listened for a few moments, then hung up, twisting the phone back into ring position.

He looked steadily at Butler. 'Don't draw your weapon,' he said.

Which of course had Butler reaching for the butt of his Sig Sauer.

'It's fine,' said Artemis reassuringly. 'Someone is here. A friend.'

Butler's hand dropped to his side. He knew who it was.

Holly Short materialized in the velvet-covered seat beside Artemis. Her knees were drawn to her chin and her pointed ears were covered by a black helmet. As she fizzled into the visible spectrum, a full-face visor collapsed into sections and stored itself in her helmet. Her arrival among the humans was covered by the theatre's darkness.

'Afternoon, Mud Boys,' she said, smiling. Her hazel eyes sparkled impishly, or more accurately, *elfishly*.

'Thanks for calling ahead,' said Butler sarcastically. 'Wouldn't want to spook anyone. No shimmer?'

Usually, when fairies used their magic to shield, the only thing visible was a slight shimmer, like a heat haze. Holly's entrance had been completely undetectable.

Holly patted her own shoulder. 'New suit. Made entirely from smart wafers. It vibrates with me.'

Artemis studied one of the wafers, noting the microfilaments in the material. 'Foaly's work? Section Eight issue.'

Holly could not hide her surprise. She punched Artemis playfully on the shoulder. 'How do you know about Section Eight? Aren't we allowed any secrets?'

'Foaly shouldn't spy on me,' said Artemis. 'Where there's a way in, there's a way back. I suppose I should congratulate you on the new job. And Foaly too.' He nodded at the tiny lens over Holly's right eye. 'Is he watching us now?'

'No. He's trying to figure out how you know what he doesn't. We're taping, though.'

'I presume you're talking about demons.'

'I might be.'

Butler stepped between them, interrupting the verbal sparring that was bound to follow.

'Before you two get into negotiations, how about a real hello?'

Holly smiled fondly at the huge bodyguard. She activated the electronic wings built into her suit and hovered to his eye level. Holly kissed his cheek, then wrapped her arms all the way round his head. They barely made it.

Butler rapped her helmet. 'Nice equipment. Not run-of-the-mill Lower Elements Police.'

'No,' agreed Holly, removing the helmet. 'This Section Eight stuff is years ahead of standard LEP. You get what you pay for, I suppose.'

Butler plucked the helmet from her hands. 'Anything an old soldier would be interested in?'

Holly pressed a button on her wrist computer. 'Check out the night vision. It's as clear as... well... day. And the clever thing is that the filter reacts to light as it passes through, so no more being blinded by camera flashes.'

Butler nodded appreciatively. Night vision's major drawback had historically been that it left the soldier vulnerable to sudden flashes of light. Even a candle flame could blind the wearer momentarily.

Artemis cleared his throat. ‘Excuse me, Captain. Are you two going to weep salty tears of admiration over a helmet all night, or do we have matters to discuss?’

Holly winked at Butler. ‘Your master calls. I’d better see what he wants.’

Holly deactivated her wings, settling into the chair. She folded her arms, looking Artemis straight in the eyes.

‘OK, Mud Boy. I’m all yours.’

‘Demons. We need to talk about demons.’

Holly’s eyes lost their playful twinkle. ‘And why *are* you so interested in demons, Artemis?’

Artemis opened two shirt buttons and pulled out a gold coin on a thong. The coin had a circular hole in the centre. Put there by a blast from Holly’s laser.

‘You gave this to me after you saved my father’s life. I owe you. I owe the People. So now, I’m doing something for them.’

Holly wasn’t entirely convinced. ‘Usually, before you do anything for the People, you negotiate a fee.’

Artemis accepted the accusation with a slight nod. ‘It’s true. It *was* true, but I have changed.’

Holly folded her arms. ‘And?’

‘And it’s nice to find something Foaly missed, even if I did stumble on to it by accident.’

‘And?’

Artemis sighed. ‘Very well. There is another factor.’

‘I thought so. What do you want? Gold? Technology?’

‘No. Nothing like that.’

Artemis sat forward in his seat. ‘Have you any idea how difficult it is to have had all those thrilling adventures with the LEP and suddenly not be a part of that world any more?’

‘Yes,’ replied Holly. ‘Actually, I do.’

‘I went from saving the world to geometry in a week. I’m bored, Holly. My intellect is not being challenged, so when I came across the demon gospel in the Book, I realized that here was a way to be involved without affecting things. I could simply observe, and perhaps refine, Foaly’s calculations.’

‘Which are not actually in the Book,’ Holly pointed out. ‘Simply observe, my foot.’

Artemis waved Holly’s point away. ‘Some harmless hacking. The centaur started it. So, I began travelling to materialization sites, but nothing happened until Barcelona. A demon showed up all right, except he showed up in the wrong place, and late. I simply stumbled across him. I would be floating in prehistoric space right now if Butler hadn’t anchored me to this dimension with silver.’

Holly stifled a laugh. ‘So it was luck. The great Artemis Fowl trumps the mighty Foaly thanks to dumb luck.’

Artemis was miffed. ‘Informed luck, I think, is a better description. Anyway, that is unimportant. I have recalculated with the new figures, and my conclusions, if borne out, could be calamitous for the People.’

‘Go on, tell me. In short words, though. You wouldn’t believe the amount of science I had to listen to today.’

‘This is serious, Holly,’ snapped Artemis. His outburst was followed by a chorus of shushes from the audience.

‘This is serious,’ he repeated in hushed tones.

‘Why?’ asked Holly. ‘Surely it’s just a matter of sharing your new figures and letting Foaly take care of the rest with light-distortion projectors?’

‘Not quite,’ said Artemis, settling back in his chair. ‘If a demon appears on that stage in the next four minutes, then soon there won’t be enough projectors to go round. If I’m right and the time spell is unravelling, then Hybras and everyone on it will soon be dragged back into this dimension. Most of the demons won’t make it alive, but those who do could pop up anywhere and at any time.’

Holly switched her gaze to the stage. A raven-haired woman was holding ridiculously high notes for a ridiculously long time. Holly wondered if the woman would even notice a

demon popping out of the air for a second or two. There wasn't supposed to be a materialization today. If there was, then that would mean Artemis was right, as usual, and a lot more demons were on the way. If that happened, then Artemis Fowl and Holly Short would be up to their necks in the whole saving-the-fairy-race thing, yet again.

Holly glanced sideways at Artemis, who was studying the stage through a pair of opera glasses. She would never tell him, but if a human had to be involved with saving the fairy People, then Artemis was probably the best man, or boy, for the job.

THE ISLAND OF HYBRAS, LIMBO

Nº1 struggled up towards the first rocky ridge on the side of the volcano. Several demons passed him on the trail, but not one tried to talk him out of it. In fact, he'd bumped into Hadley Shrivelington Basset, who had offered to scratch a map on a piece of bark for him. Nº1 suspected that if he did take the big dimensional jump, no one would miss him any more than they would miss their favourite crossbow target. Except perhaps the demoness with red markings who smiled at him. The one from the compound. Maybe she would miss him a little. Nº1 stopped in his tracks when he realized that the only demon who would care if he was gone was one he had never spoken to.

He moaned aloud. How depressing was that!

Nº1 trudged onwards past the final warning which, with typical demon subtlety, was in the form of a blood-reddened wolf skull mounted on a stick.

'What's that even supposed to mean?' muttered Nº1 as he passed the sign. 'A wolf's head on a stick. Big wolf barbecue tonight. Bring your own wolf.'

Barbecue. Another word from Lady Heatherington Smythe.

Nº1 sat on the ridge, wiggling his rump to dig a little trench for his tail. Might as well be comfortable before jumping the hundred or so metres into the mouth of a steaming volcano. Of course, even if he didn't get whisked away to the old country, he still wouldn't be vaporized by the lava. No, he would probably be dashed against the rocks on the way down. What a cheery thought.

From his seat on the ridge, Nº1 could see the jagged mouth of the crater and the rhythmic wisps of smoke that drifted skywards like the breath of a sleeping giant. It was the nature

of the time spell that things progressed as though Hybras were still attached to the rest of the world, albeit at a different pace. So the volcano still bubbled and occasionally burped up a skinny column of flame, even though there was no Earth beneath it.

If N^o1 was honest with himself, his resolve was wavering. It was easy to imagine hopping into an interdimensional crater when you were rolling your cocooned classmates into a becrusted dung pit. It had seemed then, as the flakes of dung had fluttered down on him, that things could not get any worse. And there had been something in Abbot's voice that made the idea seem irresistible. But now, sitting on the ridge, with a gentle wind cooling his chest plates, things didn't seem quite as bleak. At least he was alive, and there was no guarantee that the crater led anywhere except into the belly of the volcano. None of the other demons had made it back alive. They came back all right. Some encased in blocks of ice, some burned to a crisp, but none hale and hearty like the pride leader. Although for some reason, when N^o1 thought about Abbot, the many moments of cruelty he had suffered at the pride leader's whim seemed hazy, hard to focus on. All he could remember was that beautiful, insistent voice telling him to cross over.

Moon madness. That was the heart of the matter. Demonkind was attracted to the moon. It sang to them, agitating particles in their blood. They dreamed of it at night and ground their teeth at its absence. At any hour of the so-called day here on Hybras, demons could be seen stopping in their tracks to gaze at the space where the moon used to be. It was part of them, a live organic part, and on an atomic level, they belonged together.

There were threads of the time spell still in the crater. Wisps of magic that curled about the mountain top, snagging any demon stupid enough to be caught without silver. And coded inside the magic was the song of the moon, calling the demons back, enticing them with visions of white light and weightlessness. Once those pale tendrils had a grip on a demon's mind, he would do anything to be closer to the source. The magic and moon madness would pour energy into the atoms of his being, vibrating his very electrons to a new orbit, changing his molecular structure, pulling him through time and space.

But there was only Abbot's word that this journey would end on Earth. It could end on the moon, and as much as demons loved the moon, they knew that nothing survived on its barren surface. The elders said that sprites could not fly close without freezing to death, spiralling to Earth with frozen wings and blue faces.

For some reason, N°1 wanted to take the journey today. He wanted the moon to call him into the crater, then deposit him somewhere where another warlock existed. Someone who would teach him to control his strange powers. But, he admitted miserably, he didn't have the courage. He could not just hurl himself into a rocky crater. The volcano's base was littered with the charred corpses of those who had imagined the moon calling to them. How could he know if the moon's power was truly beckoning, or if it was simply wishful thinking?

N°1 rested his face in his hands. Nothing for it but to return to the school. The imps in the pit would need turning or their hides could suffer dung lividity marks.

He sighed. This was not the first time he had made this desperate journey. But now N°1 really thought he would do it. Abbot was in his head, urging him on. He could almost bear the idea of the rocks rushing towards him. Almost.

N°1 toyed with the silver bangle on his wrist. It would have been so easy to slip off this trinket and just disappear.

Slip it off then, little one, said a voice in his head. *Slip it off and come to me.*

N°1 was not surprised by the voice. Actually, it was more a feeling than a voice. N°1 had supplied the words himself. He often conversed with voices in his head. There was no one else to talk to. There was Flambard the shoe maker, and Lady Bonnie the spinster, and his favourite, Bookie the lispig gossip.

This voice was new. More forceful.

A moment without silver, and a new world could be yours.

N°1's bottom lip jutted as he considered. He could remove the bangle, he supposed, just for a moment. What harm could it do? He was nowhere near the crater, and the magic rarely strayed beyond the volcano.

No harm. No harm at all. One little tug.

The ridiculous notion had N°1 now. Taking off the bangle could be like a practice run for the day when he finally worked up the courage to feel the moon madness. His fingers traced the runes on the bangle. They were precisely the same as the markings on his chest. A double charm. Repelling the moon magic. Removing one meant that the force of his own

markings was reversed, pulling him straight towards the moon.

Take it off. Reverse the power.

Nº1 watched his fingers grip the bangle's rim. He was in a daze, a buzzing fugue. The new voice had coated his mind with fog and was in control.

We will be together, you and I. You will bask in my light.

Bask in my light? thought the last conscious sliver of Nº1. This new voice is quite the drama queen. Bookie is not going to like you.

Take it off, little one.

Nº1 watched his hand tug the bangle over his knuckles. He was powerless to stop himself – not that he wanted to.

Moon madness, he realized with a jolt. *All the way over here. How can that be?*

Something in him knew. The warlock part of him, perhaps.

The time spell is breaking down. No one is safe.

Nº1 saw the bangle, his dimensional anchor, slip from his fingers and spin to the ground. It seemed to happen in slow motion; the silver flowed and rippled like sunlight through water.

Nº1 felt the tingle that comes when every atom in your body is overloaded with energy and boosted into a gaseous form. It really should be terribly painful, but the body doesn't really know how to respond to this kind of cell damage and so throws up a pathetic tingling.

There was no time to scream; all Nº1 could do was disappear into a million flashing pinpoints of light, which quickly wound themselves into a tight band following a path to another dimension. In seconds there was nothing left to show that Nº1 had ever been there but a spinning silver bangle.

It would be a long time, relatively speaking, before anyone missed him. And no one would care enough to come looking.

THE MASSIMO BELLINI THEATRE, SICILY

To look at Artemis Fowl, you would have thought that he was here simply for the opera. One hand trained a pair of opera glasses on the stage; the other hand conducted expertly, following the score note for note.

‘Maria Callas is the acknowledged seminal Norma,’ he said to Holly, who nodded politely, then rolled her eyes at Butler. ‘But I have a confession: I actually prefer Montserrat Caballé. She took the role on in the seventies. Of course, I have only heard recordings, but to me, Caballé’s performance is more robust.’

‘Really,’ said Holly. ‘I’m trying to care, Artemis, really. But I thought it was all supposed to be over when the fat lady sings. Well, she’s singing, but it doesn’t appear to be over.’

Artemis smiled, exposing his incisors. ‘That’s Wagner you’re thinking of.’

Butler did not participate in the opera-related chit-chat. To him it was just another layer of distraction to be zoned out. Instead, he decided to test the night-vision filter on Holly’s new helmet. If it could indeed overcome the white-out problem, as Holly claimed, then he would have to ask Artemis to procure one for him.

Needless to say, Holly’s helmet would not fit Butler’s head. In fact, it would barely slot over his fist, so the bodyguard folded the filter’s left wing out until he could squint through it by holding the helmet to his cheek.

The effect was impressive. The filter successfully equalized the light throughout the building. It boosted or dimmed so that every person in the building was seen in the same light. Those on the stage appeared caked in make-up, and those in the boxes had no shadows to hide in.

Butler panned across the boxes, satisfying himself that there was no threat present. He saw plenty of nose-picking and handholding, sometimes by the same people. But nothing obviously dangerous. But in a second-tier box, adjacent to the stage, there was a girl with a head of blonde curls, all dressed up for a night of theatre.

Butler immediately recalled seeing the same girl at the materialization site in Barcelona. And now she was here too? Coincidence? There was no such thing. In the bodyguard’s experience, if you saw a stranger more than once, either they were following you, or you were both after the same thing.

He scanned the rest of the box. There were two men behind the girl. One in his fifties,

paunchy, expensive tuxedo, was filming the stage with his mobile-phone camera. This was the first man from Barcelona. The second man was there too, possibly Chinese, wiry, spiked hair. He had apparently not yet recovered from his leg injury and was adjusting one of his crutches. He flipped it round, removed a rubber grip from the foot, then nestled it against his shoulder like a rifle.

Butler automatically moved between Artemis and the man's line of fire. Not that the crutch was aimed at his charge; it was pointed stage right. A metre from the soprano. Just where Artemis was expecting his demon to show up.

'Holly,' he said in a low, calm voice. 'I think you should shield.'

Artemis lowered his opera glasses. 'Problems?'

'Maybe,' replied Butler. 'Though not for us. I think somebody else knows about the new materialization figures, and I think they're planning to do more than just observe.'

Artemis tapped his chin with two fingers, thinking fast. 'Where?'

'Tier two. Beside the stage. I see one possible weapon trained on the stage. Not a standard gun. Maybe a modified dart rifle.'

Artemis leaned forward, gripping the brass rail. 'They plan to take the demon alive, if one turns up. In that case, they will need a distraction.'

Holly was on her feet. 'What can we do?'

'It's too late to stop them,' said Artemis, a frown slashing his brow. 'If we interfere, we may upset the distraction, in which case the demon will be exposed. If these people are clever enough to be here, you may be sure their plan is a good one.'

Holly claimed her helmet, slotting it over her ears. Air pads automatically inflated to cradle her head. 'I can't just let them kidnap a fairy.'

'You have no choice,' snapped Artemis, risking the audience's displeasure. 'Best and most likely case scenario, nothing happens. No materialization.'

Holly scowled. 'You know as well as I do that fortune never sends the best-case scenario our way. You have too much bad karma.'

Artemis had to chuckle. 'You're right, of course. Worst-case scenario, a demon appears, they anchor it with the dart rifle, we interfere and in the confusion the demon is swept up

by the local *polizia* and we all end up in custody.'

'Not good. So we just sit back and watch.'

'Butler and I sit back and watch. You get over there and record as much data as possible. And when these people go, you go after them.'

Holly activated her wings. They slid from her backpack, crackling blue as the flight computer sent a charge through them.

'How much time do I have?' asked Holly, as she faded from sight.

Artemis checked the stopwatch on his watch.

'If you hurry,' he said, 'none.'

Holly launched herself out over the audience, controlling her trajectory using the joystick built into the thumb of her glove. She soared above the gathered humans, invisible.

With the aid of her helmet's filters, she could clearly see the occupants of the stage-side box.

Artemis was wrong. There was time to stop this. All she had to do was throw the shooter's aim off a little. The demon would never get anchored, and Section Eight could track these Mud Men at their leisure. It was simply a matter of touching the marksman's elbow with her buzz baton to make him lose control of all his motor functions for a few seconds. Plenty of time for a demon to appear, then disappear.

Then Holly smelled burning ozone and felt heat on her arm. Artemis was not wrong. There was no time. Someone was coming.

Nº1 appeared on the stage, more or less intact. The trip had cost him the last knuckle on his right index finger, and about two gigabytes worth of memories. But they were mostly bad memories and he had never been very good with his hands.

Dematerialization isn't a particularly painful process, but materialization happens to be a thoroughly enjoyable one. The brain is so happy to register all the body's essential bits and

bobs coming together again that it releases a surge of happy endorphins.

N^o1 looked at the nub where his previously whole index finger used to be.

‘Look,’ he said, tittering. ‘No finger.’

Then he noticed the humans. Scores of them, arranged in rings, rising up to the heavens. N^o1 knew instantly what this must be.

‘A theatre. I’m in a theatre. With only seven and a half fingers. *I* have only seven and a half fingers, not the theatre.’ This observation brought on another fit of giggles, and that would have been about it for N^o1. He would have been whisked off to the next stop on his interdimensional jaunt, had not a human near the stage aimed a tube at him.

‘Tube,’ said N^o1, proud of his human vocabulary, pointing with the finger that wasn’t altogether there.

After that, things happened very quickly. A flurry of events blurred like mixed stripes of vivid paint. The tube flashed; something exploded over his head. A bee stung N^o1 on the leg; a female screamed piercingly. A herd of animals, elephants perhaps, passed directly below him. Then, most disconcertingly, the ground disappeared from beneath his feet and everything went black. The blackness was rough against his fingers and face.

The last thing N^o1 heard before his own personal blackness claimed him was a voice. It was not a demon’s voice – the tones were lighter. Halfway between bird and boar.

‘Welcome, demon,’ said the voice, then sniggered.

They know, thought N^o1, and he would have panicked, had the chloral hydrate seeping into his system through a leg wound allowed such exertions. *They know all about us*.

Then the knockout serum caressed his brain, tipping him off a cliff into a deep dark hole.

Artemis watched events unfold from his box. A smile of admiration twitched at the corners of his mouth as the plan unrolled smoothly like the most expensive Tunisian carpet. Whoever was behind this was good. More than good. Perhaps they were related.

‘Keep your camera pointed at the stage,’ Artemis said to Butler. ‘Holly will get the box.’

Butler was squirming to cover Holly's back, but his place was at Artemis's side. And after all, Captain Short could look after herself. He made sure his watch crystal was trained on the stage. Artemis would never let him forget it if he missed even a nanosecond of the action.

On stage, the opera was almost over. Norma was leading Pollione to the pyre, where they were both to be burned. All eyes were upon her. Except those involved in a drama of the fairy kind.

The music was lush and layered, providing an unwitting soundtrack to the real-life drama unfolding in the theatre.

It began with an electric crackle downstage, stage right. Barely noticeable, unless you were expecting it. And even if some patrons did notice the glow, they were not alarmed. It could easily be a reflected blotch of light, or one of the special effects these modern theatre directors were so fond of.

So, thought Artemis, feeling the excitement buzz in his fingertips. *Something is coming. Another game begins.*

The 'something' began to materialize inside the crackling blue envelope. It took on a vague, humanoid shape. Smaller than the last one, but definitely a demon, and definitely *not* a reflected blotch of light. Initially, the shape was insubstantial, wraithlike, but after a second it became less transparent and more of this world.

Now, thought Artemis. Anchor it and tranquillize it too.

A slender silver tube poked from the shadows on the opposite side of the theatre. There was a small pop, and a dart sped from the tube's mouth. Artemis did not need to follow the dart's path. He knew that it was headed straight into the creature's leg. The leg would be best. A good target, but unlikely to be fatal. A silver tip with some kind of knockout cocktail.

The creature was trying to communicate now and making wild gestures. Artemis heard a few gasps from the audience as patrons noticed the shape inside the light.

Very well. You have anchored it. Now you need a distraction. Something flashy and loud, but not particularly dangerous. If somebody gets hurt, there will be an investigation.

Artemis switched his gaze to the demon. Solid now in the shadows. Around him the opera steamrolled towards Act Four's crescendo. The soprano lamented hysterically and almost every eye in the theatre was riveted on her. Almost every eye. But there are always a few bored audience members at an opera, especially by the time Act Four comes along. Those particular eyes would be wandering around the hall, searching for something, anything, interesting to watch. Those eyes would land on the little demon downstage, stage right, unless they were distracted.

Right on cue, a large stage lamp broke free of its clamp in the rigging and swung on its cable into the back canvas. The impact was both flashy and loud. The bulb exploded, showering the stage and orchestra pit with glass fragments. The bulb's filament glowed with a magnesium glare, temporarily blinding everyone staring at it. Which was almost the entire audience.

Glass rained down on the orchestra, and the musicians panicked, fleeing en masse towards the green room, dragging their instruments behind them. A cacophony of squealing strings and overturned percussion instruments shattered any echoes of Bellini's masterpiece.

Nice, thought Artemis appreciatively. The clamp and the filament were rigged. The stampeding orchestra is a lucky bonus.

Artemis appreciated all of this out of the corner of his eye. His main focus was the diminutive demon, lost in the shadows behind a canvas flat.

Now, if it was me, thought the Irish teenager, I would have Butler drop a black sack over that little creature and whisk him out of the stage door into a four-wheel drive. We could be on the ferry to Naples before the theatre crew got the bulb changed.

What actually happened was slightly different. A stage trapdoor opened beneath the demon and it disappeared on a hydraulic platform.

Artemis shook his head in admiration. Fabulous. His mysterious adversaries must have hijacked the theatre computer system. And when the demon appeared, they simply sent a command to open the appropriate trapdoor panel. Doubtless, there was someone waiting below to transfer the sleeping demon to an idling vehicle outside.

Artemis leaned over the railing, gazing into the audience below. As the house lights were brought up, the theatre patrons rubbed their dazzled eyes and spoke in the sheepish tones

that follow shock. There was no talk of demons. No pointing and screaming. He had just witnessed the perfect execution of a perfect plan.

Artemis gazed across to the box on the far side of the stage. The three occupants stood calmly. They were simply leaving. The show was over and it was time to go. Artemis recognized the pretty girl from Barcelona and her two guardians. The thin man seemed to have recovered from his leg injury, as his crutches were now tucked underneath one arm.

The girl wore a self-satisfied smile, the kind that usually decorated Artemis's own face after a successful mission.

It's the girl, Artemis realized with some surprise. *She is the brains here.*

This girl's smile, a reflection of his own, rankled Artemis. He was not accustomed to being two steps behind. No doubt she believed that victory was hers. She may have won this battle, but the campaign was far from over.

It's time, he thought, *that this girl knew she had an opponent.*

He brought his hands together in a slow handclap.

'Brava,' he called. *'Brava, ragazza!'*

His voice carried easily above the heads of the audience. The girl's smile froze on her lips and her eyes searched for the source of this compliment. In seconds she located the Irish teenager, and their eyes locked.

If Artemis had been expecting the girl to quail and tremble at the sight of him and his bodyguard, then he was disappointed. True, a shadow of surprise flitted across her brow, but then she accepted the applause with a nod and royal wave. The girl said two words before she left. The distance was too great for Artemis actually to hear them, but even if he hadn't long since trained himself to lip-read, it would have been easy to guess what they were.

Artemis Fowl, she said. Nothing more. There was a game beginning here. No doubt about it. How intriguing.

Then a funny thing happened. Artemis's clapping hands were joined by a scattering of others from various spots in the theatre. The applause grew from hesitant beginnings to a crescendo. Soon the patrons were on their feet and the bewildered singers were forced to

take several curtain calls.

On his way through the lobby minutes later, Artemis was highly amused to overhear several audience members gushing over the unorthodox direction of the opera's final scene. The exploding lamp, mused one buff, was doubtless a metaphor for Norma's own falling star. But no, argued a second. The lamp was obviously a modernistic interpretation of the burning stake which Norma was about to face.

Or perhaps, thought Artemis as he pushed through the crowd to find a light Sicilian mist falling on his forehead, *the exploding lamp was simply an exploding lamp.*

CHAPTER 5: IMPRISONED



CAPTAIN Holly Short of Section Eight followed the abductors to a Land Rover Discovery, and from there to the Naples ferry. Their captive had been transferred from a canvas sack into a stout golf bag, which was then topped off with the heads of several clubs. It was a very slick operation. Three adult male humans and one teenage female. Holly was only mildly surprised to see that a young girl was involved. After all, Artemis Fowl was little more than a child and he managed to involve himself in far more complex plots than this.

The Land Rover was returned to a Hertz rental in Italy, and from there the group took a first-class sleeper carriage on an overnight bullet train along the western coast. It made sense to travel by train. There was no need to pass the golf bag through an X-ray machine.

Holly didn't need to worry about X-ray machines, or indeed any form of human security device. Wearing her Section Eight Shimmer Suit, she was invisible to any kind of ray the border police could throw at her. The only way to find a shielded fairy was to hit one accidentally with a stone, and even then you would probably only get an invisible smack on the ear for your trouble.

Holly slipped into the sleeper carriage and deposited herself on an unused luggage rack over the girl's head. Below her, the three humans propped the golf bag against the table, and stared at it as if... as if there was a demon inside.

Three men and one girl. It would be easy to take them. She could knock them out with her Neutrino, then get Foaly to send in some techs to do mind wipes. Holly was itching to free the poor demon. It would take mere seconds. The only things stopping her were the voices in her head.

One of those voices belonged to Foaly, the other to Artemis.

'Hold your position, Captain Short,' advised Foaly the centaur. 'We need to see how far this goes.'

Section Eight had become very interested in Holly's mission since the demon abduction.

Foaly was keeping a dedicated line to her helmet open.

Holly's helmet was soundproof, yet she was still nervous talking in such close proximity to the targets. The trick in this situation is to train oneself to speak without any of the usual accompanying gestures. This is harder than it sounds.

'That poor demon will be terrified,' said Holly, lying perfectly still. 'I have to get it out of there.'

'No,' said Artemis sharply. 'You have to see the bigger picture, Holly. We have no idea how big this organization is, or how much they know about the fairy People.'

'Not as much as you. Demons don't carry the fairy Book. They're not much for rules.'

'At least you have something in common,' said Butler.

'I could use the *mesmer* on them,' Holly offered. The *mesmer* was one of the tricks in every fairy's magical bag. It was a siren's song that could have any human happily spilling his guts. 'That would *make* them tell me what they know.'

'And only what *they* know,' Artemis pointed out. 'If I was running this organization, everyone would be told only what they needed to know. Nobody would know everything, except me, of course.'

Holly resisted the urge to thump something in frustration. Artemis was right, of course. She had to hang back and see how this situation played out. They needed to spread their net as wide as possible in order to catch all the members of this group.

'I'll need back-up,' Holly whispered. 'How many agents can Section Eight spare?'

Foaly cleared his throat, but didn't answer.

'What is it, Foaly? What's going on down there?'

'Ark Sool caught wind of the abduction.'

The mere mention of that gnome's name drove Holly's blood pressure up a few points. Commander Ark Sool was the reason she had quit the LEP in the first place.

'Sool! How did he find out about it so quickly?'

'He's got a source somewhere in Section Eight. He called in Vinyáya. She had no option but to hand over all the facts.'

Holly groaned. Sool was the king of red tape. As the dwarfs said, *he couldn't make a decision if he was holding a jug of water and his bum-flap was on fire.*

‘What’s the word?’

‘Sool is going for damage limitation. The blast walls are up and overground missions have been cancelled. No further action pending a meeting of the Council. If the manure hits the air circulator, Sool isn’t going to be the one taking the blame. Not on his own.’

‘Politics,’ spat Holly. ‘Sool only cares about his precious career. So you can’t send me anyone?’

Foaly chose his words carefully. ‘Not officially. And no one official. I mean, it would be impossible for anyone, a consultant, say, to get past the blast walls carrying something you might need, if you see what I mean.’

Holly understood exactly what Foaly was trying to tell her.

‘Ten four, Foaly. I’m on my own. Officially.’

‘Exactly. As far as Commander Sool knows, you are simply shadowing the suspects. You are only to take action if they decide to go public. In that case your orders are, and I’m quoting Sool here, “to take the least complicated and most permanent course of action”.’

‘He means vaporize the demon?’

‘Sool didn’t say that, but that’s what he wants.’

Holly despised Sool more with every heartbeat. ‘He can’t order me to do that! Killing a fairy goes against every law in the Book. I won’t do it.’

‘Sool knows he can’t officially order you to use terminal force on a fairy. What he’s doing here is making an unofficial recommendation. The kind that could have a major effect on your career. It’s a tricky one, Holly. Best-case scenario, this all blows over somehow.’

Artemis voiced the opinion that they all held. ‘That’s not going to happen. This is no opportunistic snatch. We are dealing with an organized group that knew what they were after. These people were at Barcelona and now here. They have an agenda for their demon, and, unless they’re military, I would bet it involves going public for large amounts of money. This will be bigger than the Loch Ness monster, Bigfoot and the Yeti all rolled into one.’

Foaly sighed. 'You're in a fix, Holly. The best thing that could happen for you right now would be a nice non-lethal injury to take you out of the game.'

Holly remembered her old mentor's words. *It's not about what's best for us*, Julius Root had told her once. *It's about what's best for the People*.

'Sometimes it's not about us, Foaly. I'll figure this out somehow. I do have help, right?'

'That's right,' confirmed the centaur. 'It's not as if it's the first time we've saved the fairy world.'

Foaly's confident tones made Holly feel better, even if he was hundreds of miles underground.

Artemis interrupted them. 'You two can swap war stories later. We can't afford to miss a word that these people say. If we can beat them to their destination, it could be an advantage.'

Artemis was right. This was not a time for drifting. Holly ran a quick systems check on her helmet instruments, then pointed her visor at the humans below.

'You getting this, Foaly?' she asked.

'Clear as crystal. Did I tell you about my new gas screens?'

Artemis's sigh rattled through the speakers.

'Yes, you did. Now be quiet, centaur. We're on a mission, remember.'

'Whatever you say, Mud Boy. Hey, look, your *girlfriend* is saying something.'

Artemis had a vast mental reserve of scathing comebacks at his disposal, but none of them covered *girlfriend* insults. He wasn't even sure if it was an insult. And if it was, who was being insulted? Him or the girl?

*

The girl spoke French as only a native could.

'Technically,' she said, 'the only crime we are guilty of is fare-dodging, and perhaps not even that. Legally speaking, how can you kidnap something that is not supposed to exist? I doubt anyone ever accused Murray Gell-Mann of kidnapping a quark, even though he knowingly carried a billion of them around in his pocket.' The girl chuckled gently.

No one else laughed, except an eavesdropping Irish boy two hundred miles away at Fontanarossa International Airport, about to board the last Alitalia flight to Rome. Rome, Artemis reasoned, would be a lot more central than Sicily. Wherever the demon was headed, Artemis could get there faster if he flew from Rome.

‘That wasn’t bad,’ Artemis commented, then relayed the joke to Butler. ‘Obviously, there are differences in the scenarios, but it’s a joke, not a quantum physics lecture.’

Butler’s left eyebrow cranked up like a drawbridge. ‘Differences in the scenarios, that’s just what I was thinking.’

Back on board the bullet train, one of the men, the one with the miraculously healed leg, shifted on the leatherette upholstery.

‘What time do we get into Nice, Minerva?’ he said.

This single sentence was a goldmine of information for the listening Artemis. Firstly, the girl’s name was Minerva, named presumably for the Roman goddess of wisdom. So far, a very apt name indeed. Secondly, their destination was Nice in the south of France. And thirdly, this girl seemed to be in charge. Extraordinary.

The girl, who had been smiling still at her quark joke, switched to irritated mode.

‘No names, remember? There are ears everywhere. If a single person uncovers a single detail of our plan, everything we have worked for could be ruined.’

Too late, Mud Girl, thought Captain Holly Short, from her luggage rack. Artemis Fowl already knows too much about you. Not to mention my own little guardian angel, Foaly.

Holly snapped a close-up of the girl’s face.

‘We have a mugshot and a first name, Foaly. Is that enough for you?’

‘Should be,’ replied the centaur. ‘I got stills of the males too. Give me a while to run them through my database.’

Below her, the second man from Barcelona unzipped the fake top from the golf bag.

‘I should check on my *clubs*,’ he said. ‘See if they’re settled OK. If they’ve started to move about, I might put in something to keep them still.’

All of which would have been a perfectly acceptable code, had there not been a camera

pointed right at them.

The man reached into the bag, and after a moment's feeling around, he pulled out a small arm and checked the pulse.

'Fine. Everything's fine.'

'Good,' said Minerva. 'Now, you should get some sleep. We have a long journey ahead of us. I will stay awake for a while, because I feel like reading. The next person can read in four hours.'

The three men nodded, but nobody lay down. They just sat there, staring at the golf bag, as if there were a demon in there.

Artemis and Butler picked up a lucky connection to Nice with Air France and by ten they had checked into the Hotel Negresco and were enjoying coffee and croissants on the Promenade des Anglais.

Holly was not so lucky. She was still perched on a luggage rack on board a train. Not the same luggage rack. This was her third rack altogether. First, they had to change in Rome, then again in Monte Carlo, and now finally they were headed for Nice.

Artemis was speaking into his little finger which transmitted the vibrations to the fairy phone in his palm.

'Any hints as to the exact final destination?'

'Nothing yet,' replied a tired and irritated Holly. 'This girl is controlling the adults with a rod of iron. They're afraid to say anything. I am sick of lying on this rack. I feel like I have been lying on racks for a year. What are you two doing?'

Artemis put his decaf cappuccino down gently, so as not to rattle the saucer. 'We're at the Nice Library, trying to dig up anything on this Minerva person. Perhaps we can find out if she has a villa near here.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Holly. 'I had visions of you two drinking tea at the beach, while I sweat it out here.'

Six metres from where Artemis was sitting, waves swirled along the beach like emerald

paint poured from a bucket.

‘Tea? At the beach? No time for luxuries, Holly. There is important work to be done.’ He winked at Butler.

‘Are you sure you’re at the library? I thought I heard water.’

Artemis smiled, enjoying the exchange. ‘Water? Surely not. The only thing flowing here is information.’

‘Are you grinning, Artemis? For some reason I get the feeling that you’re wearing that smug smile of yours.’

Foaly cut into the line. ‘Pay dirt, Holly. It took a while, but we tracked down our mystery girl.’

Artemis’s smile vanished. All business now. ‘Who is she, Foaly? To be honest I am amazed that I don’t already know her.’

‘The girl is Minerva Paradizo, twelve years old, born in Cagnes sur Mer, the south of France. The bespectacled man is her father. Gaspard Paradizo. Fifty-two. Cosmetic surgeon, of Brazilian descent. One more child, a boy, Beau, five years old. The mother left a year ago. Lives in Marseilles with the ex-gardener.’

Artemis was puzzled. ‘Gaspard Paradizo is a cosmetic surgeon? Why did it take so long to find these two? There must have been records, pictures.’

‘That’s just it. There were no pictures on the Net. Not even a local paper snapshot. I got the feeling that somebody had systematically wiped out every e-trace of this family they could find.’

‘But nobody can hide from you, eh, Foaly?’

‘That’s right. I ran a deep probe and came across a ghost image on a French TV archive page. Minerva Paradizo won a national spelling bee when she was four. Once I had the name, then it was easy to retrieve all the other wipes. Your *girlfriend* is quite something, Artemis. She has already completed high school, and is currently studying for two distance learning degrees. Quantum physics and psychology. I suspect that she also has a doctorate in chemistry under an assumed name.’

‘What about the other two men?’ asked Holly, moving the conversation on before Foaly

could get in another *girlfriend* crack.

‘The Latin one is Juan Soto. Head of Soto Security. He seems to be a legitimate security operative. Not much expertise, hardly any training. Nothing to worry about.’

‘And the sniper?’

‘The crutch guy is Billy Kong. A real nasty piece of work. I’m sending the file to your helmet.’ In seconds the mail alert dinged in Holly’s ear and she opened the file in her visor. A three-dimensional photo of Kong revolved slowly in the top left corner of the visor, while his criminal record scrolled down before her eyes.

Artemis cleared his throat. ‘I don’t happen to have a helmet, Foaly.’

‘Oh yes, little Master Lo-tech,’ said Foaly, his voice dripping with condescension. ‘Shall I read it for you?’

‘If your mighty brain can bear to use simple vocalization.’

‘OK. Billy Kong. Grew up in a circus, lost an eye in a fight with a tiger...’

Artemis sighed. ‘Please, Foaly, we don’t have time for jokes.’

‘Sure,’ retorted the centaur. ‘Like you’re in the library. OK then, the truth. Born Jonah Lee, Malibu, early seventies. Family originally from Taiwan. Mother Annie. One older brother, Eric, killed in a gang fight. The mother moved them both back to Hsinchu, south of Taipei. Kong moved to the city and became a petty thief. He had to leave in the nineties when a row with an accomplice turned into a murder charge. Kong used a kitchen knife on his friend. There’s still a warrant out for him there, under the name Jonah Lee.’

Holly was surprised. Kong seemed harmless enough. He was a slight man with spiked, highlighted hair. He seemed more like a member of a boy band than a close-up man.

‘Moved to Paris and changed his name,’ continued Foaly. ‘Took up martial arts. He’s had facial surgery, but not enough to escape my computer.’

Artemis lowered his phone hand and talked to Butler.

‘Billy Kong?’

The bodyguard drew a sharp breath. ‘Dangerous man. He has a small, well-trained crew. They hire themselves out as bodyguards to people who live dangerously. I heard he went

legit and was working for a doctor in Europe.'

'Kong is on the train,' said Artemis. 'He was the man with the fake crutch.'

Butler nodded thoughtfully. Kong was infamous in underworld circles. The man had no morals, and would happily perform any task, however distasteful, for the right price. Kong only had one rule: never quit until the job is done.

'If Billy Kong is involved, things just got a lot more dangerous. We need to rescue that demon as quickly as possible.'

'Agreed,' said Artemis, raising the phone. 'Do we have an address, Foaly?'

'Gaspard Paradizo owns a chateau on the Vence side of Tourrettes sur Loup, twenty minutes from Nice.'

Artemis finished his cappuccino in a single draught. 'Very well. Holly, we shall meet you there.'

Artemis stood, straightening his suit jacket. 'Butler, old friend, we need some surveillance equipment. Do you know anybody in Nice who might oblige?'

Butler flipped open a wafer-thin mobile phone. 'What do you think?'

TOURRETTES SUR LOUP, SOUTHERN FRANCE

Tourrettes sur Loup is a small artisans' village perched on the lower slopes of the Alpes Maritimes. The Paradizo chateau was further up the slopes, on a flattened peak below the snowline.

The chateau was originally nineteenth century but had undergone extensive renovation. The walls were solid stone, the windows were reflective and probably bulletproof, and there were cameras everywhere. The road leading to the chateau was typical of the region: narrow and tightly looped. There was an observation tower on the building's southern corner which afforded any sentry a 360-degree view of any avenue of approach. Several men patrolled the grounds close to the main building and the gardens were dotted with grassy dunes, but did not provide a shred of cover.

Artemis and Butler were concealed in a line of bushes on the adjacent slope. Butler studied the chateau through high-powered binoculars.

‘You certainly can pick them,’ noted the bodyguard. ‘I think I saw this place in a Bond movie once.’

‘No problem for you, surely?’

Butler frowned. ‘I’m a bodyguard, Artemis. A human bulletproof vest. Breaking into fortified castles is not my speciality.’

‘You have rescued me from more secure locations than this one.’

‘True,’ agreed the bodyguard. ‘But I had intel, an inside man. Or I was desperate. If I had to walk away from here, it wouldn’t trouble me unduly, so long as you were walking away with me.’

Artemis patted his arm. ‘We can’t walk away, old friend.’

Butler sighed. ‘I suppose not.’ He handed Artemis the binoculars. ‘Now, start at the western corner and sweep east.’

Artemis raised the binoculars to his eyes, then adjusted the focus.

‘I see two-man patrols.’

‘Soto’s private security company. No weapons showing, but they have bulges below their jackets. Basic training, I imagine. But with more than twenty of them on and around the premises it would be very difficult to overpower them all. And even if I did, the local police would be here in minutes.’

Artemis moved the binoculars a few degrees. ‘I see a little boy wearing a cowboy hat driving a toy car.’

‘Paradizo’s son, Beau, presumably. Nobody pays much attention to him. Move on.’

‘Sensors in the eaves?’

‘I’ve actually researched that particular model. The very latest sealed security pods. Closed circuit, infrared, motion sensors, night vision. The works. I’ve been meaning to upgrade Fowl Manor.’

There were small speakers on spikes dotted around the chateau.

‘A sound system?’

Butler snorted. ‘I wish. Those are waffle boxes. They transmit interference. Our

directional microphones are useless here. I doubt even Foaly could pick up anything inside that building.’

Holly shimmered into visibility beside them. ‘You’re right. He’s pulled one of our shrouded satellites out of orbit to get a look at this place, but it’s going to be several hours before the chateau is inside its footprint.’

Butler took his hand off his gun butt. ‘Holly, I wish you wouldn’t appear like that. I’m a bodyguard. I get jumpy.’

Holly smiled, punching him on the leg. ‘I know, big man. That’s why I do it. Think of me as on-the-job training.’

Artemis barely glanced up from the binoculars. ‘We need to find out what’s happening in there. If only we could get a man inside.’

Holly frowned. ‘I can’t go into a human dwelling without permission. You know the rules. If a fairy enters a human dwelling without an invitation, they lose their magic, and that’s after a few hours of painful vomiting and cramps.’

After the battle at Tailte, Frond, the king of the fairy People, had tried to keep mischievous fairies away from human dwellings by imposing magical *geasa* or rules on fairies. He had used his warlocks to construct a powerful spell to impose his will. Anyone attempting to break these rules would become deathly ill and lose their magic. Now, the spell was fading with time, but it was still strong enough to cause nausea and a dimming of the sparks of magic.

‘What about Butler? You could lend him a sheet of Foaly’s cam foil. He’d be as good as invisible.’

Holly shook her head. ‘There’s a laser pyramid all over the grounds. Even with cam foil, Butler would break the beams.’

‘Mulch then? He’s a criminal, long past the allergic reaction stage. Cramps and vomiting wouldn’t affect him.’

Holly scanned the grounds with her X-ray filter. ‘This place is built on solid rock, and the walls are a metre thick. Mulch could never burrow in there unnoticed.’ Her X-ray vision fell on the skeleton of a small boy driving his little electric car. She raised her visor to see Beau

Paradizo zigzagging through the guards unmolested.

‘Mulch couldn’t get in there,’ she said, smiling. ‘But I think I know someone who could.’

CHAPTER 6: DWARF WALKS INTO A BAR

THE LOWER ELEMENTS



MULCH Diggums strolled through Haven's Market District, feeling more relaxed with every step. The Market District was a lowlife zone, as much as you could have a lowlife zone on a street which boasted two hundred cameras and a permanent LEP cabin on the corner. But even so, criminals outnumbered civilians here eight to one.

My kind of people, thought Mulch. Or at least they used to be before I threw in with Holly.

It wasn't that Mulch regretted teaming up with Holly, but sometimes he did miss the old days. There was something about thievery that made his heart sing. The thrill of the snatch, the euphoria of easy money.

Don't forget the despair of prison, his practical side reminded him. And the loneliness of life on the run.

True. Crime wasn't all fun and games. It had minor downsides, like fear, pain and death. But Mulch had been able to ignore those for a long time, until Commander Julius Root had been killed by a criminal. Until then it had all been a game. Julius was the cat and he was the elusive mouse. But with Julius gone, returning to a life of crime would seem like a slap in the face to the commander's memory.

And that's why I like this new job so much, concluded Mulch happily. I get to run around behind the LEP's back and consort with known criminals.

He had been watching talk shows in the Section Eight lounge when Foaly had come cantering in. Truth be told, Mulch liked Foaly. They knocked sparks off each other whenever they met, but it kept both of them on their toes, or hooves, whichever the case may be.

In this instance, there had been no time for tomfoolery, and Foaly had brusquely explained the situation above ground. They did have a plan, but it hinged on Mulch's

ability to find the pixie smuggler Doodah Day and bring him back to Section Eight.

‘That’s going to take some doing,’ noted Mulch. ‘The last time I saw Doodah, he was scraping dwarf gunge off his boots. He doesn’t like me very much. I’m going to need leverage.’

‘You tell that pixie that if he helps us out he’s a free fairy. I’ll go into the system myself and wipe his record.’

Mulch raised his shaggy eyebrows. ‘It’s that important?’

‘It’s that important.’

‘I saved this city,’ grumbled the dwarf. ‘Twice in fact! Nobody ever wiped my record. This pixie goes on one mission and *poof*, he walks. What do I get? Seeing as we’re handing out wishes.’

Foaly stamped a hoof impatiently. ‘You get your exorbitant consultant’s fee. Whatever. Just get on this. Do you have any way to track Mister Day down?’

Mulch whistled. ‘It’s going to be devilishly tough. That pixie will have gone to ground after this morning. But I have certain skills. I can do it.’

Foaly glowered at him. ‘That’s why you get paid the big bucks.’

In fact, finding Doodah was not going to be quite as devilishly difficult as Mulch had pretended. The last thing Mulch had done before waving a cheery goodbye to Doodah Day was to slip a tracker pill down his boot.

The tracker pills had been a gift from Foaly. He liked to pass redundant equipment to Holly to help keep the agency afloat. The pills were made from a baked adhesive gel that started to melt as soon as you popped it from its foil case. The gel stuck to whatever it was touching and adopted its colour. Inside was a tiny transmitter that emitted harmless radiation for up to five years. The tracking system was not very sophisticated. Each pill left its signature on the individual foil cases, so the case glowed whenever it detected the signature radiation. The brighter the glow, the closer the pill.

Idiotproof, Holly had quipped, issuing the pills.

And idiotproof they were proving to be. Barely ten minutes after leaving Section Eight, Mulch had tracked Doodah Day to the Market District. By the dwarf’s reckoning, his quarry

was somewhere within a twenty-metre radius. The most likely place was the fish bar across the street. Pixies loved fish. Especially shellfish. Especially, especially protected shellfish such as lobster. Which was why Doodah's smuggling skills were so much in demand.

Mulch crossed the street, adjusted his expression to fearsome and barged into Happy as a Clam as if he owned the place.

The bar was ostensibly a dive. The floor was bare boards and the air stank of week-old mackerel. The menu was written on the wall in what looked like fish blood, and the only customer appeared to be asleep in a bowl of chowder.

A pixie waiter glared at him from behind a knee-high counter.

'There's a dwarf bar down the street,' he said.

Mulch flashed him a toothy grin. 'Now that's not very hospitable. I could be a customer.'

'Not likely,' said the waiter. 'I never saw a dwarf pay for a meal yet.'

It was true. Dwarfs were scroungers by nature.

'You got me,' admitted Mulch. 'I'm no customer. I'm looking for someone.'

The waiter gestured at the almost deserted restaurant. 'If you don't see him, he ain't here.'

Mulch flashed a very shiny LEP temporary deputy badge that Foaly had issued. 'I think I might take a closer look.'

The waiter ran out from behind his counter. 'I think you might need a warrant to take one more step, cop.'

Mulch brushed him aside. 'I'm not that kind of cop, pixie.'

Mulch followed the transmitter's signal through the main restaurant down a shabby corridor and into the toilets, which were even shabbier. Even Mulch winced, and *he* burrowed in mud for a living.

One cubicle had an 'Out of order' sign on the door. Mulch squeezed into the pixie-sized space and quickly located the secret door. He wormed his way through into a far more salubrious room than the one he had just left. There was a velvet-lined cloakroom box, staffed by a rather surprised pixie in a pink dress.

‘Do you have a reservation?’ she asked haltingly.

‘More than one,’ replied Mulch. ‘For starters, do you think it’s a good idea to put the secret entrance to an illegal restaurant in a toilet? It didn’t fool me, and I think I lost my appetite.’

Mulch did not wait for an answer. Instead, he bowed under a low lintel into an opulent main restaurant. Here dozens of pixies were tucking into steaming plates of shellfish. Doodah Day was alone at a table for two, cracking a lobster with a hammer as if he hated it.

Mulch walked over, ignoring the surprised glares from other diners.

‘Thinking about someone?’ he asked, lowering himself into a tiny pixie chair.

Doodah glanced up. If he was surprised, he hid it well.

‘You, dwarf. I’m imagining that this claw is your fat head.’

Doodah brought the hammer down hard, splattering Mulch with white lobster meat.

‘Hey, watch it! That stinks.’

Doodah was livid. ‘That stinks! That stinks! I’ve taken three showers. Three! And I can’t get the stink of your mouth offa me. It follows me like my own personal sewer. You see I’m eating alone. Usually, I got me a table full of buddies, but not today. Today I smell like dwarf.’

Mulch was unperturbed. ‘Hey, easy, little guy. I could get offended.’

Doodah waved the hammer. ‘You see anyone in here caring how you feel? Offended or otherwise.’

Mulch took a deep breath. This was going to be a hard sell.

‘Yeah, OK, Doodah. Point made. You’re a real wise guy. A ticked-off wise guy. But I got an offer for you.’

Doodah laughed. ‘You got an offer for me? I got an offer for you. Why don’t you get your dwarf stink outta here before I crack your teeth with this hammer?’

‘I get it,’ said Mulch testily. ‘You’re a tough little guy, and mean too. And a dwarf would have to be crazy to mess with you. Generally, I would sit here for a couple of hours, trading

insults. But today I'm busy. A friend of mine is in trouble.'

Doodah smiled broadly, raising a glass of wine in a mock toast. 'Well, dwarf, here's hoping it's that slippery elf Holly Short. 'Cause there's nobody I would rather see up to her pointy ears in something dangerous.'

Mulch showed his teeth, but he wasn't smiling.

'Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. You attacked my friend with a multimixer. Nearly killed her.'

'Nearly,' said Doodah, raising a finger. 'Just scared her is all. She shouldn't have been chasing me. I just smuggle a few crates of shrimp. I don't kill anyone.'

'Just drive.'

'That's right. Just drive.'

Mulch relaxed. 'Well, Doodah, lucky for you, your driving skill is the very thing stopping me unhinging my jaw and chewing on you like one of those shrimp balls you got there. And this time who knows which end you'd come out.'

The bravado instantly drained from Doodah's face.

'I'm listening,' he said.

Mulch reined in his teeth.

'OK. So, you can drive anything, right?'

'Absolutely anything. I don't care if Martians built it, Doodah Day can drive it.'

'Good, because I got an offer for you. I'm not particularly happy about it, but I have to run it past you anyway.'

'Go for it, Stinky.'

Mulch groaned internally. Their little band of adventurers needed another smart-ass like they needed ten years of bad luck.

'I need you for one day, to drive one vehicle, for one trip. You do that and you have amnesty.'

Doodah was impressed. It was an impressive deal.

‘So all I gotta do is drive and you wipe the slate?’

‘Apparently.’

Doodah tapped his forehead with a lobster claw. ‘This is too easy, there’s gotta be a catch.’

Mulch shrugged. ‘Well, it’s going to be above ground and there’ll be a lot of armed Mud Men chasing after you.’

‘Yeah?’ grinned Doodah through a mouthful of lobster juice. ‘But what’s the catch?’

CHAPTER 7: BOBO'S RUN

THE PARADIZO CHATEAU, SOUTHERN FRANCE



BY the time Mulch and Doodah landed outside Tourrettes sur Loup, the dwarf was a nervous wreck.

‘He’s crazy,’ he gibbered, tumbling from the hatch of a tiny titanium pod, which had been landed expertly on a flat patch not much bigger than a postage stamp. ‘The pixie is crazy! Give me your gun, Holly. I’m going to shoot him.’

Doodah Day appeared in the hatch, hopping nimbly to the ground. ‘That ship is fantastic,’ he said in Gnommish. ‘Where can I get one?’

His grin withered and died when he noticed that the thing he had previously believed to be a tree moved and spoke in one of the primitive Mud Man tongues.

‘This would be Doodah Day, I presume. He makes a lot of noise, doesn’t he?’

‘Arkkkk,’ said Doodah. ‘Big Mud Man.’

‘Yes, he is,’ said another Mud Man, or maybe a Mud Boy. This one was smaller, but somehow seemed even more dangerous.

‘You speak Gnommish?’ asked the terrified pixie, in case the big one would eat him for not being polite.

‘Yes,’ said Artemis. ‘I do, but Butler is not so fluent. So English, if you wouldn’t mind.’

‘Sure thing. Not a problem,’ said Doodah, grateful that he still had the tiny spark of magic left in his brain necessary to fuel his gift of tongues.

Doodah and Mulch had flown across the lower peaks of the Alpes Maritimes in a pod built for riding the magma flares from the Earth’s core. These chutes had rudimentary shields, but they were not intended for above-ground travel. Doodah’s instructions had been to ride the hotshots to a small port near Berne, Switzerland, then strap on a pair of wings

and low-fly the rest of the way. But once Doodah got behind the pod's wheel, he decided that it would be much faster if they did the second leg on board the tiny ship.

Holly was impressed. 'You fly pretty well for a smuggler. Those pods handle like a three-legged pig.'

Doodah slapped a titanium fin fondly. 'She's a good girl. You just need to treat her right.'

Mulch was still shaking. 'We came *this close* – *this close* to being incinerated! I lost count after the first dozen times.'

Doodah chortled. 'That's not all you lost, dwarf. Someone is going to have to swab the decks in there.'

Holly looked Doodah in the eyes. OK, they were making small talk, but there was a little history between them.

'You could have killed me, pixie,' said Holly evenly, giving the little smuggler a chance to explain himself.

'I know. I nearly did. That's why it's time for me to get out of the business. Review the situation. Take a long hard look at my priorities.'

'Horse manure,' tutted Holly. 'I don't believe a word.'

'Me neither,' said Doodah. 'That's my parole board spiel. With the big eyes and the wobbly lip, works every time. But seriously, I'm sorry about the multimixer thing, Officer. I was desperate. But you were never in danger. These hands are pure magic on a wheel.'

Holly decided to let it go. Nursing a grudge would only make a difficult mission next to impossible. And anyway, now Doodah would have a chance to make it up to her.

Butler lifted Mulch to his feet.

'How are you doing there, Mulch?'

Mulch glowered at Doodah. 'I will be doing fine once my head stops spinning. That ship is only built for one, you know. I've had that little monkey on my lap for the past few hours. Every time we went over a bump, he butted me under the chin.'

Butler winked at his dwarf friend. 'Well, look at it this way. You had to take a ride in his environment, but now he has to take a ride in yours.'

Doodah caught the end of that sentence. 'Ride? What ride? Who has to take a ride?'

Mulch rubbed his hairy palms together. 'I am going to enjoy this.'

They lay down in a row in a low ditch overlooking the chateau. The land sloped gently downwards and was dotted with the twisted forms of ancient olive trees. The surface soil was dry and loose, but reasonably tasty according to Mulch.

'The Alpine water is pretty good,' he explained, spitting out a mouthful of pebbles. 'And the olives give the clay a nice tang.'

'That's very nice,' said Artemis patiently. 'But all I really want to know is can you make it to the septic tank?'

'Septic tank?' said Doodah nervously. 'What are we talking about septic tanks for? I ain't going into no septic tank. Forget the deal.'

'Not into the tank,' corrected Artemis. 'Behind it. The tank is the only cover before the chateau itself.'

Holly was scanning the terrain with her visor. 'The tank is buried as close to the house as possible. After that it's just rock. But you have a nice thick vein of soil as far as that point. What you need to do is lure that boy in the cowboy hat in behind the tank with a bar of chocolate, then Doodah takes his place.'

'Then what? That toy car isn't going anywhere fast.'

'It doesn't need to, Doodah. All you have to do is drive inside the house and wind this round any video cable you see.'

Holly handed Doodah a cable tie with tiny spikes along its length. 'This is loaded fibre optic. Once it's in place, we own their surveillance.'

'Can we rewind to the bar of chocolate?' said Mulch. 'Does anyone have one?'

'Here,' said Artemis, handing him a flat bar in a green wrapper. 'Butler bought this in the village. It's very low quality, not seventy per cent cocoa, or fair trade for that matter, but it will do.'

'So what about after the kid eats the chocolate?' asked Mulch. 'What do I do with a kid?'

'You are not to injure him,' said Holly. 'Just entertain him for a minute.'

‘Entertain him? How am I supposed to do that?’

‘Use your dwarf talents,’ suggested Artemis. ‘Young children are inquisitive. Eat some rocks. Pass wind. Little Beau will be fascinated.’

‘Couldn’t I just shoot him?’

‘Mulch!’ said Holly, horrified.

‘I don’t mean kill him. Just knock him out for a few minutes. Kids like naps. I’d be doing him a favour really.’

‘Knocking him out would be ideal,’ admitted Holly. ‘But I don’t have anything safe, so you’ll have to keep him busy for five minutes tops.’

‘I am a charmer, I suppose,’ said Mulch. ‘And if worst comes to worst, I can always eat him.’ He grinned widely at Holly’s horrified expression. ‘I’m kidding. Honest. I’d never eat a Mud Kid, they’re too bony.’

Holly elbowed Artemis, who was beside her on the bank.

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘It was your basic idea,’ replied Artemis. ‘But, yes, I am sure. There are other options, but we don’t have the time. Mulch has always displayed initiative. I feel certain he won’t let us down. As for Mister Day, his freedom is on the line. A strong incentive to perform.’

‘Enough of the chatter,’ said Mulch. ‘I’m starting to burn here. You know how sensitive dwarf skin is.’ He stood, unbuttoning a bum-flap on the seat of his pants. Where else would a bum-flap be? ‘OK, pixie. Hop on.’

Doodah Day seemed genuinely frightened. ‘Are you sure?’

Mulch sighed. ‘Sure I’m sure. What are you afraid of? It’s just a rear end.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But it’s smiling at me.’

‘Perhaps it’s happy to see you. You don’t want to be there if it gets angry.’

Holly punched Mulch on the shoulder.

‘That is a really bad habit,’ complained Mulch, rubbing his upper arm. ‘You should see someone about your anger issues.’

‘Could you please quit the bum talk? We’re on a tight schedule here!’

‘OK. Get on, pixie. I promise it won’t bite.’

Butler lifted the tiny pixie on to Mulch’s back.

‘Just don’t look down,’ advised the bodyguard. ‘You’ll be OK.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ grumbled Doodah. ‘You’re not the one riding the whirlwind. You never mentioned this in the restaurant, Diggums.’

Artemis pointed at the pixie’s backpack. ‘Do you really need that, Mister Day? It’s not very streamlined.’

Doodah held on to the strap. ‘Tools of the trade, Mud Boy. They go where I go.’

‘Very well,’ said Artemis. ‘A word of advice. Get in and out as fast as you can.’

Doodah rolled his eyes. ‘Wow, that’s great advice. You should write a book.’

Mulch chortled. ‘Good one.’

‘And avoid his family,’ continued Artemis. ‘Especially the girl Minerva.’

‘Family. Minerva. Got it. Now, let’s go if we’re going, before I lose my nerve.’

The dwarf unhinged his jaw with wince-worthy cracks, and dived head first into the mound of earth. It was something to see, scythe-like jaws chomping through the dirt, excavating a tunnel for the dwarf and his passenger. Doodah’s eyes were tightly shut, and his expression was one of absolute shock.

‘Oh, gods,’ he said. ‘Let me off. Let me –’

Then they were gone, lost under a blanket of vibrating earth. Holly elbowed her way atop the mound, following their progress through her visor.

‘Diggums is fast,’ she proclaimed. ‘I’m surprised we ever caught him.’

Artemis lay beside her. ‘I hope he’s fast enough. The last thing we need is for Minerva Paradizo to add a dwarf and a pixie to her fairy collection.’

Mulch felt good underground. This was a dwarf’s natural habitat. His fingers absorbed the rhythms of the earth, and they calmed him. His coarse beard hairs, which were actually a series of sensors, dug into the clay, worming into cracks, sending out pings and reporting

back to Mulch's brain. He could feel rabbits digging half a mile to his left. Maybe he could snag one on the way back, for a snack.

Doodah hung on for dear life. His face was a rictus of desperation. He would have screamed, but that would have meant opening his mouth. And that was out of the question.

Just below Doodah's toes, Mulch's behind churned out a rapid-fire mixture of dirt and air, driving the pair deeper into the tunnel. Doodah could feel the heat from the reaction spreading up his legs. Every now and then, the pixie's boots dropped too close to the dwarf's rear exhaust and Doodah would have to jerk them up or lose a toe.

It only took Mulch a minute to reach the septic tank. He eased himself from the earth, blinking mud from his eyes with thick corkscrew dwarf lashes.

'Spot on,' he mumbled, spitting out a wriggling worm.

Doodah hauled himself over the dwarf's head, clamping a hand over his own mouth to stop himself screaming. After several deep breaths, he calmed down sufficiently to hiss at Mulch.

'You enjoyed that, didn't you?'

Mulch rehinged his jaw, then released a final burst of tunnel gas, which popped him out of the earth.

'It's what I do. Let's say we're even for the pod ride.'

Doodah disagreed. 'Let's say I still owe you one for swallowing me.'

The bickering would probably have continued, in spite of the urgency of their mission, had not a little boy in an electric toy car come trundling round the corner of the tank.

'Hello. I am Beau Paradizo,' said the driver. 'Are you monsters?'

Doodah and Mulch froze momentarily, then remembered the plan.

'No, little boy,' said Mulch, glad he still had the tiny spark of magic necessary to speak French. He tried to smile endearingly, something he didn't spend a lot of time practising in the mirror. 'We are the chocolate fairies. And we have a special gift for you.' He waved the chocolate bar, hoping the theatrical presentation would make the cheap candy seem more impressive than it was.

‘Chocolate fairies?’ said the boy, climbing from his car. ‘Sugar-free chocolate, I hope. Because I get hyper with sugar, and Daddy says that God knows I’m already hyper enough without it, but he still loves me.’

Mulch glanced at the label. Eighteen per cent sugar.

‘Yep. Sugar-free. Would you like a square?’

Beau took the entire bar and demolished it in less than ten seconds.

‘You fairies stink. Especially you, hairy. You stink worse than the blocked toilet in Aunty Morgana’s. Stinky fairy.’

Doodah laughed. ‘What can I tell you. The kid tells it like it is, Mulch.’

‘Do you live in a blocked toilet, Mister Fatty Chocolate Fairy?’

‘Hey,’ said Mulch brightly. ‘How about a nap? Would you like a nap, kid?’

Beau Paradizo punched Mulch in the stomach. ‘I had a nap, stupid. More chocolate! Now!’

‘No punching! I don’t have more chocolate.’

Beau punched him again. ‘I said more chocolate! Or I’m going to call the guards. And Pierre will reach down your throat and pull out your guts. That’s what he does. He told me.’

Mulch sniggered. ‘I’d like to see him reach into my insides.’

‘Really?’ asked Beau brightly. ‘I’ll get him!’ The little boy sprinted for the corner of the tank. He moved with surprising speed, and Mulch’s instincts took over from his brain. The dwarf leaped towards the boy, unhinging as he went.

‘Pierre!’ shouted Beau once, but not a second time, because Mulch had enclosed him in his mouth. All except the cowboy hat.

‘Do not swallow!’ hissed Doodah.

Mulch worked the boy round his cheeks for a few seconds, then spat him out. Beau was dripping wet and sound asleep. Mulch wiped the child’s face before the dwarf spittle could harden.

‘Sedative in the saliva,’ he explained, hooking up his jaw. ‘It’s a predator thing. You didn’t fall asleep yesterday because I didn’t do your head. He’ll wake up completely

refreshed. I'll peel this stuff off when it hardens.'

Doodah shrugged. 'Hey, do I care? I didn't like him anyway.'

A voice drifted over the tank. 'Beau? Where are you?'

'That must be Pierre. You better get moving, lead him away from here.'

Doodah poked his head above the embankment. A large man was headed their way. Not as large as Butler, true, but plenty big enough to squash the pixie under a single boot. The man wore a black security jumpsuit with matching hat. A pistol grip poked from between the buttons. The man squinted towards the tank.

'Beau? Is that you?' he said in French.

'*Oui. C'est moi,*' replied Doodah in a warbling falsetto.

Pierre was not convinced. The voice had sounded more like a talking piglet than a child. He kept coming, reaching inside his jumpsuit for the gun.

Doodah bolted for the electric car. On the way he picked up Beau's cowboy hat, jamming it on to his head. Pierre was barely a dozen steps away now, and quickening his pace.

'Beau? Come here now. Minerva wants you in the house.'

Doodah slid over the bonnet into the car, hillbilly style. He could tell from a single glance that this toy wouldn't do much more than walking speed, which would be zero use to him in an emergency. He pulled a flat black panel from his bag, suckering it on to the little car's plastic dash. This was a Mongocharger, something no self-respecting smuggler would leave home without. The Mongocharger was equipped with a strong computer, omni-sensor and a clean nuclear battery pack. The omni-sensor hacked into the toy car's tiny chip and took over its workings. Doodah pulled a retractable spike cable from the Mongocharger's base and plunged the tip into the car's own power cable beneath the dash. Now the toy car was nuclear-powered. Doodah revved the accelerator.

'That's more like it,' he said, satisfied.

Pierre came round the right side of the tank. This was good because Mulch and the dozing Beau were on his blind side. It was bad because Pierre was directly behind Doodah.

'Beau?' said Pierre. 'Is something wrong?' His gun was out, pointed at the ground.

Doodah's foot hovered over the accelerator, but he couldn't punch it now. Not with this goon staring down his neck.

'Nothing's wrong... eh... Pierre,' he trilled, keeping his face hidden under the cowboy hat's brim.

'You sound strange, Beau. Are you ill?'

Doodah tipped the accelerator, inching forward.

'No. I'm fine. Just doing funny voices, the way human kids do.'

Pierre was still suspicious. 'Human kids?'

Doodah took a chance. 'Yes. Human kids. I'm an alien today, pretending to be a human, so go away or I will reach down your throat and pull out your guts.'

Pierre stopped in his tracks, thought for a moment, then remembered.

'Beau, you scoundrel. Don't let Minerva hear you talking like that. No more chocolate if you do.'

'Pull out your guts!' repeated Doodah for good measure, accelerating gently across a gravel bed on to the driveway.

The pixie pulled a stick-on convex mirror from his pack, suckering it to the windscreen. He was relieved to see that Pierre had holstered his weapon and was headed back to his post.

Even though it went against all his smuggler's instincts, Doodah kept his speed down on the driveway. His teeth knocked together as he drove over the uneven granite flagstones. A digital read-out informed him that he was utilizing one hundredth of one per cent of the engine's new power. Doodah remembered just in time to mute the Mongocharger. The last thing he needed right now was the computer's electronic voice complaining about his driving skills.

There were two guards in front of the main doors. They barely glanced down as Doodah swept past.

'Howdy, Sheriff,' said one, grinning.

'Chocolate,' squeaked Doodah. From the little he knew about Beau, it seemed the

appropriate thing to say.

He tapped the accelerator to bump him over the lintel, then drove slowly across a streaked marble floor. The tyres spun for grip on the sleek stone, which was a bit worrying – it could cost crucial seconds in the event that he had to make a quick getaway. But at least the corridor was wide enough for a U-turn if one became necessary.

Doodah motored down the hallway, past rows of towering potted palms and several bright abstract works of art until he came to the corridor's end. There was a camera mounted over an archway, pointed directly at the front hall. A cable snaked out from the box and into a conduit which ran down to the base of the wall.

Doodah pulled up by the conduit, hopping from the car. So far his luck was holding. Nobody had challenged him. This human security was lame. In any fairy building he would have been laser-scanned a dozen times by now. The pixie yanked a section of conduit away, revealing the cable beneath. It took him mere seconds to twist the length of loaded fibre optics round the video cable. Job done. Smiling, Doodah climbed back into his stolen car. This had been a sweet deal. Amnesty for five minutes' work. Time to go home and enjoy a life of freedom, until he broke the rules again.

'Beau Paradizo, you little brat. Come over here, right now!'

Doodah froze momentarily, then checked his mirror. There was a girl behind him, glaring his way, hands on hips. This, he guessed, would be Minerva. If memory served, he was supposed to keep far away from Minerva.

'Beau. It's time for your antibiotic. Do you want to have that chest infection forever?'

Doodah started the car, rolling it towards the arch and out of this Mud Girl's sight line. Once round the corner, he could floor the accelerator.

'Don't you dare drive away from me, Bobo.'

Bobo? No wonder I'm driving away, thought Doodah. Who would drive towards someone calling them Bobo?

'Eh... chocolate?' said the pixie hopefully.

It was the wrong thing to do. This girl knew her brother's voice when she heard it, and that wasn't it.

‘Bobo? Is there something wrong with your voice?’

Doodah swore under his breath.

‘Ches’ inflec-chun?’ he said.

But Minerva wasn’t buying it. She took a walkie-talkie from her pocket and took rapid strides towards the car.

‘Pierre, can you come in here, please? Bring André and Louis.’ And then to Doodah, ‘Just stay there, Bobo. I have a nice bar of chocolate for you.’

Sure, thought Doodah. *Chocolate and a concrete cell.*

He considered his options for a second and came to a conclusion. The conclusion was: *I would rather escape quickly than get captured and tortured to death.*

I am out of here, thought Doodah, and floored the accelerator, sending several hundred horsepower shuddering down the fragile driveshaft. He had maybe a minute before the car fell apart, but by then he could be far away from this Mud Girl and her transparent promises of chocolate.

The car took off so fast that it left an image of itself where it had been.

Minerva stopped dead. ‘What?’

There was a corner coming up quickly. Doodah pulled the wheel in as far as he could, but the vehicle’s turning circle was too wide.

‘Gotta bounce it,’ said Doodah through gritted teeth.

He leaned hard left, eased up on the accelerator and hit the wall side-on. At the moment of impact he shifted his weight and stepped on the gas. The car lost a door, but shot out of the corner like a stone from a sling.

Beautiful, thought Doodah, as soon as his head stopped ringing.

He had maybe seconds now before the girl could see him again, and who knew how many guards stood between him and freedom.

He was in a long straight corridor, opening on to a sitting room. Doodah could see a wall-mounted television and the top rim of a red velvet sofa. There must be steps down into the room. Not good. This car only had one more impact left in it.

‘Where is Bobo?’ shouted the girl. ‘What have you done with him?’

No point in subtlety now. Time to see what this buggy could do. Doodah jammed his foot on the accelerator, then made a beeline for a window behind the velvet sofa. He patted the dash.

‘You can do it, you little junk box. One jump. Your chance to be a thoroughbred.’

The car didn’t answer back. They never did. Though occasionally in times of extreme stress and oxygen deprivation, Doodah imagined they shared his cavalier attitude.

Minerva came round the corner. She was running hard, and screaming into a walkie-talkie. Doodah heard the words *apprehend*, *necessary violence* and *interrogation*. None of which boded well for him.

The toy car’s wheels spun on a long rug, then caught. The rug was shunted backwards like a length of toffee from a roller. Minerva was bowled over, but kept talking as she went down.

‘He’s headed for the library. Take him down! Shoot if necessary.’

Doodah held on to the wheel grimly, keeping his line. He was going out of that window, closed or not. He entered the room at seventy miles per hour, flying off the top step. Not bad acceleration for a toy. There were two guards in the room, in the act of drawing their weapons. They wouldn’t shoot though. It still appeared as though the car was being driven by a child.

Suckers, thought Doodah – then the first bullet crashed into the chassis. OK, maybe they would shoot the car.

He flew in a gentle arc towards the window. Two more bullets took plastic chunks from the bodywork, but it was too late to stop the tiny vehicle. It clipped the lower frame, lost a fender and tumbled out through the open window.

Someone really should be filming this, thought Doodah, as he clenched his teeth for impact.

The crash shook him all the way from his toes to his skull. Stars danced before Doodah’s eyes for a moment, then he was in control again, careering towards the septic tank.

Mulch was waiting, his wild halo of hair quivering with impatience.

‘Where have you been? I’m running out of sunblock.’

Doodah did not waste time with an answer. Instead, he extricated himself from the all but demolished car, prising off his Mongocharger and mirror.

Mulch pointed a stubby finger at him. 'I have a few more questions.'

A bullet fired from the open window ricocheted off the septic tank, throwing up concrete splinters.

'But they can wait. Hop on.'

Mulch turned, presenting Doodah with his back, and more besides. Doodah jumped on, grabbing thick hanks of Mulch's beard.

'Go!' he shouted. 'They're right behind me!'

Mulch unhinged his jaw and he went into the clay like a hairy torpedo.

But fast as he was, they wouldn't have made it. Armed guards were two paces away. They would have seen the gently snoring Beau and riddled the moving tunnel mound with bullets. They probably would have tossed in a few grenades for good measure. But they didn't, because at that precise moment all hell broke loose inside the chateau.

As soon as Doodah had twisted the loaded fibre optics round the video cable, hundreds of tiny spikes had punctured the rubber, making dozens of strong contacts with the wiring inside.

Seconds later in Section Eight HQ, information came flooding into Foaly's terminal. He had video, alarm systems, waffle boxes and communications all flashing up in separate windows on his screen.

Foaly cackled, cracking his knuckles like a concert pianist. He loved those old fibre optic twists. Not as fancy as the new organic bugs, but twice as reliable.

'OK,' he said into a reed mike on his desk. 'I'm in control. What kind of nightmares would you like to give the Paradizos?'

In the south of France, Captain Holly Short spoke into her helmet microphone. 'Whatever you have. Storm troopers, helicopters. Overload their communications, blow out their waffle boxes. Set off all the alarms. I want them to believe they are under attack.'

Foaly called up several phantom files on his computer. The phantoms were one of his own pet projects. He would lift patterns from human movies, soldiers, explosions whatever, and then use them universally in whatever scene he chose. In this case he sent a squad of French Army special forces, the *Commandement des Opérations Spéciales*, or COS, to the Paradizos' closed-circuit system. That would do nicely for starters.

*

Inside the chateau, the Paradizo chief of security, Juan Soto, had a little problem. His little problem was that a couple of loose shots were being popped off in the house. This can only be seen as a little problem in relation to the very big problem that Foaly was sending his way.

Soto was speaking into a radio.

'Yes, Miss Paradizo,' he said, keeping his voice calm... 'I realize that your brother may be missing. I say *may be* because that *may be* him in the toy car. It sure looks like him to me. OK, OK, I take your point. It is *unusual* for toy cars to fly that far. It could be a malfunction.'

Soto resolved to have strong words with the two idiots who had actually fired on a toy car on Minerva's command. He did not care how smart she was, no child was giving orders like that on his watch.

Even though Miss Minerva was nowhere near the security centre and could not see his face, Chief Soto adopted a stern expression for the lecture he was about to give.

'Now, Miss Paradizo, you listen to me,' he began, then his expression changed completely as the security system went ballistic.

'Yes, Chief, I'm listening.'

The chief held on to his radio with one hand; with the other he flicked numerous switches on his security console, praying for malfunction. 'There seems to be a full squad of COS converging on the chateau. My God, there are some in the house. Helicopters, the rooftop cameras are picking up helicopters.' Transmissions suddenly squawked through the band monitor. 'And we have chatter. They're after you, Miss Paradizo, and your prisoner. My God, the alarms have all been tripped. Every sector. We're surrounded! We need to evacuate. I can see them in the treeline. They have a tank. How did they get a tank up

here?’

Outside, Artemis and Butler watched the chaos Foaly had created. Alarm klaxons ripped through the Alpine air and security men sprinted to ordained spots.

Butler lobbed a few smoke grenades into the grounds to add to the effect.

‘A tank,’ said Artemis wryly into his fairy phone. ‘You sent them a tank?’

‘You’ve hacked into the audio feed?’ said Foaly sharply. ‘Just what else can that phone of yours do?’

‘It can play solitaire and minesweeper,’ replied Artemis innocently.

Foaly grunted doubtfully. ‘We’ll talk about this later, Mud Boy. For now, let’s concentrate on the plan.’

‘Excellent suggestion. Do you have any phantom guided missiles?’

The security chief nearly fainted. The radar had picked up two tracks spiralling from the belly of a helicopter.

‘*Mon Dieu!* Missiles. They’re firing smart bombs at us. We must evacuate now.’

He flicked open a perspex panel, revealing an orange switch below. With only a moment’s hesitation, he pressed the orange switch. The various alarms were immediately cut off and replaced by a single continuous whine. The evac alarm.

The moment this was sounded, the guards changed course, heading for their assigned vehicles or principals, and the non-security residents of the chateau began gathering data or whatever was most precious to them.

On the eastern side of the house, a series of garage doors opened and six black BMW four-wheel drives sprang into the courtyard like cougars. One had blacked-out windows.

Artemis studied the situation through binoculars.

‘Watch the girl,’ he said into the tiny phone in his palm. ‘The girl is the key. I’m guessing hers is the vehicle with the tinted windows.’

The girl Minerva appeared through patio doors, speaking calmly into a walkie-talkie. Her father trailed beside her, dragging a protesting Beau Paradizo by the hand. Billy Kong came

last, bending slightly under the weight of a large golf bag.

‘Here we go, Holly. Are you ready?’

‘Artemis! I’m the field agent here,’ came the irritated reply. ‘Stay off my band unless you have something to contribute.’

‘I was just thinking...’

‘I was just thinking that *you* should change your middle name to *control freak*.’

Artemis glanced across at Butler, who was lying beside him on the verge and couldn’t help overhearing the entire exchange.

‘Control freak? Can you believe that?’

‘The nerve of some people,’ replied the bodyguard, without taking his eyes off the chateau.

To their left, a small patch of earth began to vibrate. Mud, grass and insects were thrust upwards in a sudden gush, followed by two heads. One dwarf and one pixie.

Doodah climbed over Mulch’s shoulders, collapsing on the ground.

‘You people are crazy,’ he panted, plucking a beetle from his shirt pocket. ‘I should be getting more than amnesty for this. I should be getting a pension.’

‘Quiet, little man,’ said Butler calmly. ‘Phase two of the plan is about to start, and I wouldn’t want to miss it because of you.’

Doodah blanched. ‘Neither would I. Want you to miss it, that is. Because of me.’

Outside the chateau’s garage, Billy Kong popped one of the BMW’s boots, hefting the golf bag inside. It was the car with the tinted windows.

Artemis opened his mouth to issue an order, then closed it again. Holly probably knew what to do.

She did. The driver’s door clunked open a fraction, apparently all on its own, then closed again. Before Minerva or Billy Kong could do more than blink in surprise, the four-by-four started up and laid down a six-metre length of rubber skidding towards the main gate.

‘Perfect,’ said Artemis under his breath. ‘Now, Miss Minerva Paradizo, would-be criminal mastermind, let us see exactly how smart you are. I know what I would do in this situation.’

Minerva Paradizo's reaction was a bit less dramatic than one might expect from a child who has just had her prize possession stolen. There were no tantrums or foot-stamping. Billy Kong also defied expectations. He did not so much as draw a weapon. Instead, he squatted on his hunkers, ran his fingers through Manga hair and lit a cigarette, which Minerva promptly plucked from his lips and squashed underfoot.

Meanwhile, the four-by-four was getting away, barrelling towards the main gates. Perhaps Minerva was confident that the reinforced steel barrier would be sufficient to halt the BMW in its tracks. She was wrong. Holly had already weakened the bolts with her Neutrino. One tap from the vehicle's grille would be more than sufficient to barge the gates out of the way. If it got that far. Which it did not.

After she had crushed Kong's cigarette, Minerva took a remote control from her pocket, tapped in a short code, then hit the 'Send' button. In the BMW's cab, a tiny charge detonated in the airflow system, releasing a cloud of sevoflurane, a potent sleeping gas. In seconds, the vehicle began to weave, ramping the driveway bushes and cutting a swathe through the manicured lawn.

'Problems,' said Butler.

'Hmm,' said Artemis. 'A gas device, I would guess. Fastacting. Possibly cyclopropane or sevoflurane.'

Butler knelt, drawing his pistol. 'Should I stroll in there and get them?'

'No. You shouldn't.'

The BMW was careering wildly now, following the dips and slopes of the grounds' topography. It destroyed a mini-golf green, pulverized a gazebo and decapitated a centaur statue.

Hundreds of miles below ground, Foaly winced.

The vehicle finally came to rest in a lavender bed, nose down, rear wheels spinning, spitting out hunks of clay and uprooted long-stemmed purple flowers, like missiles.

Nice action, thought Mulch, but he kept the notion to himself, fully aware that this might not be the time to stretch Butler's patience.

Butler was raring to go. His gun was out and the tendons in his neck were stretched, but

Artemis held him back with a touch to the forearm.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not now. I know your impulse is to help, but now is not the time.’

The bodyguard jammed his Sig Sauer handgun back into its holster, scowling. ‘Are you sure, Artemis?’

‘Trust me, old friend.’

And of course, Butler did, even if his instincts were not so sure.

Inside the grounds, a dozen security guards were warily approaching the vehicle, led by Billy Kong. The man moved like a cat, on the balls of his feet. Even his face was feline, smug grin and flat eyes.

On his signal, the men rushed the car, reclaiming the golf bag and hauling an unconscious Holly from the front seat. The elf was cuffed with plastic ties and hauled across the garden to where Minerva Paradizo and her father stood waiting.

Minerva removed Holly’s helmet and kneeled to examine her pointed ears. Through his binocular lenses, Artemis could clearly see that she was smiling.

It had been a trap. All a trap.

Minerva tucked the helmet under her arm, then walked briskly back towards the house. Halfway there, she stopped and turned. Shielding her eyes from the sun’s glare, she scanned the shadows and peaks of the surrounding hillsides.

‘What’s she looking for?’ Butler speculated aloud.

Artemis did not wonder. He knew exactly what this surprising girl was after.

‘She’s looking for us, old friend. If that was your chateau, perhaps you might have wondered where a spy would conceal himself.’

‘Of course. And that’s why I picked this spot. The ideal location would have been further up the hill, in that cluster of rocks, but that would also have been the first spot any security expert would booby-trap. This would be my second choice, and so, my first choice.’

Minerva’s gaze swept past the rock cluster and rested on the line of bushes where they were hiding. She couldn’t possibly see them, but her intellect told her that they were there.

Artemis focused on the girl’s pretty face. It amazed him that he could appreciate

Minerva's features, even as his friend was being hauled into captivity. Puberty was a powerful force.

Minerva was smiling. Her eyes were bright and they taunted Artemis across the vale between them. She spoke in English then. Artemis and Butler, both expert lip-readers, had no difficulty interpreting her short sentence.

'Did you get that, Artemis?' asked Butler.

'I got it. And she got us.'

'Your move, Artemis Fowl,' Minerva had said.

Butler sat back in the ditch, slapping mud from his elbows.

'I thought you were one of a kind, Artemis, but that girl is a smart one.'

'Yes,' said Artemis, musing. 'She's a regular juvenile criminal mastermind.'

Below ground, in Section Eight HQ, Foaly groaned into his microphone.

'Great,' he said. 'Now there are two of you.'

CHAPTER 8: SUDDEN IMPACT

INSIDE THE CHATEAU PARADIZO



Nº1 was having a lovely dream. In the dream, his mother was holding a surprise party for him, in honour of his graduation from warlock college. The food was scrumptious. The dishes were cooked and most of the meat was already dead.

He was reaching for a beautifully presented basted pheasant in a basket of woven herb bread ropes, just like the one described in Chapter Three of *Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow*, when suddenly the vision retreated into the far distance, as though reality itself was being stretched.

Nº1 tried to follow the feast but it drew further and further away, and now his legs wouldn't work and Nº1 couldn't understand why. He looked down and saw to his horror that everything from his armpits down had turned to stone. The stone virus was spreading upwards across his chest and along his neck. Nº1 felt the urge to scream. He was suddenly terrified that his mouth would turn to stone before he could scream. To be petrified forever and hold that scream inside would be the ultimate horror.

Nº1 opened his mouth and screamed.

Billy Kong, who had been lounging on a chair watching, snapped his fingers at a camera on the ceiling.

'The ugly one is awake,' he said. 'And I think it wants its mother.'

Nº1 stopped screaming when his breath ran out. It was a bit of an anticlimax really, starting out with a lusty howl and petering off to a reedy whine.

OK, thought Nº1. *I am alive and in the land of men. Time to open my eyes and find out just how deep in the pig dung I actually am.*

Nº1 cracked his eyes open warily, as though he might see something big and hard

heading for his face at high speed. What he did see was that he was in a small bare room. There were rectangular lights on the ceiling that threw out the light of a thousand candles, and most of one wall was taken up by a mirror. There was a human, possibly a child, perhaps a female, with a ridiculous mane of blonde curls and an extra finger on each hand. The creature was wearing a ludicrously impractical toga-type arrangement and spongy-soled shoes, with lightning bolts embossed on the sides. There was another person in the room. A slouching, leering, thin man, who tapped a staccato rhythm on his leg. N^o1's eyes were drawn to the second human's hair. There were at least half a dozen colours in there. The man was a peacock.

N^o1 decided that perhaps he should raise his empty hands, to show that he wasn't carrying a weapon, but it's difficult to do that when you are tied to a chair.

'I'm tied to a chair,' he said apologetically, as though it was his fault. Unfortunately, he said this in Gnommish and in the demon dialect. To the humans it sounded like he was trying to dislodge a particularly annoying blockage from his throat.

N^o1 resolved not to talk again. Doubtless, he would say the wrong thing and the humans would have to ritually execute him. Thankfully, the female seemed eager to chat.

'Hello, I am Minerva Paradizo and this man is Mister Kong,' she said. 'Can you understand me?'

It was all gibberish to N^o1. Not a single recognizable word from the text of *Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow*.

He smiled encouragingly, to show he appreciated the effort.

'Do you speak French?' asked the blonde girl, then switched languages. 'How about English?'

N^o1 sat up. That last bit was familiar. Strange inflections, surely, but the words themselves were from the book.

'English?' he repeated.

This was the language of Lady Heatherington Smythe. Learned at her mother's knee. Explored in the lecture halls of Oxford. Used to profess her undying love for Professor Rupert Smythe. N^o1 loved the book. He sometimes believed that he was the only one who

did. Even Abbot didn't seem to appreciate the romantic bits.

'Yes,' said Minerva. 'English. The last one spoke it well enough. French too.'

Manners must be appreciated somewhere outside a book, N^o1 had always thought, so he decided to give them a go.

He growled, which was the polite demon way of asking to speak in front of your betters. This must not be how humans interpreted it because the skinny human jumped to his feet, pulling out a knife.

'No, kind sir,' said N^o1, hurriedly cobbling together a couple of sentences from Lady Heatherington. 'Prithee sheathe thine weapon. I bring joyous tidings only.'

The skinny human was confounded. He spoke English as well as the next American, but this little runt was spouting some kind of medieval nonsense.

Kong straddled N^o1, holding the knife to his throat.

'Talk straight, ugly,' said the man, deciding to give Taiwanese a go.

'I wish I could understand,' said N^o1, shaking. Unfortunately, he said this in Gnommish. 'What I... eh... meanest to say is...'

It was no good. Quotes from Lady Heatherington that he could generally shoehorn into any occasion just weren't coming under pressure.

'Talk straight or die!' shrieked the human into his face.

N^o1 shrieked right back at him. 'How can I talk straight, you son of a three-legged dog? I don't speak Taiwanese!'

All of this was said in perfect Taiwanese. N^o1 was stunned. The gift of tongues was not one demons possessed. Except the warlocks. More proof.

He intended to ponder this development for a few moments, now that the knife-wielding human had backed off, but suddenly the beauty of language exploded inside his brain. Even his own tongue, Gnommish, had been severely culled by the demons. There were thousands of words that had dropped from regular use on the basis that they did not relate to killing things or eating them, and not necessarily in that order.

'Cappuccino!' shouted N^o1, surprising everyone.

‘Excuse me?’ said Minerva.

‘What a lovely word. And manoeuvre. And balloon.’

The skinny man pocketed his knife. ‘Now he’s talking. If he’s anything like the videos you showed me of the other one, we’ll never get him to shut up.’

‘Pink!’ exclaimed N°1 delightedly. ‘We don’t have a word for that colour in the demon commonspeak. Pink is considered undemonlike, so we ignore it. It’s such a relief to be able to say pink!’

‘Pink,’ said Minerva. ‘Fabulous.’

‘Tell me,’ said N°1. ‘What is a candyfloss? I know the words, and it sounds... scrumptious... but the picture in my head cannot be accurate.’

The girl seemed pleased that N°1 could talk, but slightly miffed that he had forgotten his situation.

‘We can talk about candyfloss later, little demon. There are more important things to discuss.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Kong. ‘The demon invasion, for example.’

N°1 rolled the sentence round in his head. ‘Sorry, my gifts must not be fully developed. The only meaning I have for *invasion* is a hostile entry of an armed force into a territory.’

‘That’s the one I mean, you little toad.’

‘Again, I’m a little confused. My new vocabulary is telling me that a toad is a froglike creature...’ N°1’s face fell. ‘Oh, I see – you’re insulting me.’

Kong scowled at Minerva. ‘I think I preferred him when he spoke like an old movie.’

‘I was quoting scripture,’ explained N°1, enjoying the shape of these new words in his mouth. ‘From the sacred book: *Lady Heatherington Smythe’s Hedgerow*.’

Minerva frowned, looking at the ceiling as she thought back in time. ‘Lady Heatherington Smythe. Why is that familiar?’

‘*Lady Heatherington Smythe’s Hedgerow* is the source of all our human knowledge. Lord Abbot brought it back to us.’ N°1 bit his lip, shutting off his own babbling. He had said too much already. These humans were the enemy, and he had given them the blueprint to

Abbot's plans. *Blueprint*. Nice word.

Minerva clapped her hands once, sharply. She had found the memory she was looking for.

'Lady Heatherington Smythe. My goodness, that ridiculous romance! Remember, Mister Kong?'

Kong shrugged. 'I don't read fiction. Manuals, mostly.'

'No, remember the video footage of the other demon. We let him have a book; he carried it around like a security blanket.'

'Ah, yes. I remember that. Stupid little goat. Always toting around that stupid book.'

'You know, you're repeating yourself,' said N^o1, wittering nervously. 'There are other words for *stupid*. Dim, dense, slow, thick. Just to name a few. I can do Taiwanese if you prefer.'

A knife appeared in Kong's hand as if from nowhere.

'Wow,' said N^o1. 'That's a real talent. A *bravura* in fact.'

Kong ignored the compliment, flipping the knife so he was holding the blade.

'Just shut up, creature. Or this goes between your eyes. I don't care how valuable you are to Miss Paradizo. To me, you and your kind are simply something to be wiped off the face of the Earth.'

Minerva folded her arms.

'I will thank you, Mister Kong, not to threaten our guest. You work for my father, and you will do what my father tells you to do. And I am pretty sure my father told you to keep a civil tongue in your head.'

Minerva Paradizo may have been a precocious talent in many areas, but because of her age, she had limited experience. From her studies, she knew how to read body language, but she did not know that a skilled martial artist can train himself to control his body, so that his real feelings are hidden. A true disciple of the discipline would have noted the subtle tightening of the tendons in Billy Kong's neck. This was a man holding himself in check.

Not yet, his stance said. *Not yet*.

Minerva returned her attention to N°1.

'Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow, you say?'

N°1 nodded. He was afraid to speak in case his runaway mouth leaked any more information than it already had.

Minerva spoke now to the large mirror. 'You remember that one, Papa? The most ridiculous fluffy romance you are ever likely to avoid like the plague. I loved it when I was six. It's all about a nineteenth-century English aristocrat. Oh, who's the author... Carter Cooper Barbison. The Canadian girl. She was eighteen when she wrote it. Did absolutely no research. She had nineteenth-century nobles speaking like they were from the fifteen hundreds. Absolute tosh, so obviously a worldwide hit. Well, it seems our old friend Abbot brought it home with him. The cheeky devil has managed to sell it as gospel truth. It seems he has the rest of the demons spouting Cooper Barbison as though she were an evangelist.'

N°1 broke his no-speaking vow. 'Abbot? Abbot was here?'

'Mais oui,' said Minerva. 'How do you think we knew where to find you. Abbot told us everything.'

A voice boomed through a wall-mounted speaker. 'Not everything. His figures were flawed. But my young genius Minerva figured it out. I'll get you a pony for this, darling. Whatever colour you like.'

Minerva waved at the mirror. 'Thank you, Papa. You should know by now that I don't like ponies. Or ballet.'

The speaker laughed. 'That's my little girl. What about a trip to Disneyland, Paris? You could dress as a princess.'

'Perhaps after the selection committee,' said Minerva with a smile. The smile was slightly forced, though. She did not have time for Disney dreams at the moment. 'After I am sure of the Nobel nomination. We have less than a week to question our subjects and organize secure travel to the Royal Academy in Stockholm.'

N°1 had another important question. 'And *Lady Heatherington Smythe's Hedgerow*? It's not true?'

Minerva laughed delightedly. ‘True? My dear little fellow. Nothing could be further from the truth. That book is a cringeworthy testament to teenage hormonal fabrication.’

Nº1 was stunned. ‘But I studied that book. For hours. I acted out scenes. I made costumes. Are you telling me that there is no Heatherington Hall?’

‘No Heatherington Hall.’

‘And no evil Prince Karloz?’

‘Fiction.’

Nº1 remembered something. ‘But Abbot came back with a crossbow, just like in the book. That’s evidence.’

Kong joined the discussion; after all, this was his area of expertise. ‘Crossbows? Ancient history, toad. We use things like these now.’ Billy Kong drew a black ceramic handgun from a holster tucked in his armpit. ‘This little beauty shoots fire and death. We’ve got much bigger ones too. We fly round the world in our metal birds and rain down exploding eggs on our enemies.’

Nº1 snorted. ‘That little thing shoots fire and death? Flying metal birds? And I suppose you eat lead and blow golden bubbles too.’

Kong did not respond well to cynicism, especially from a little reptilian creature. In one fluid motion, he flicked the safety off his weapon and fired three shots, blowing apart the headrest of Nº1’s seat. The imp’s face was showered with sparks and splinters, and the sound of the shots echoed like thunder in the confined space.

Minerva was furious. She began screaming long before anyone could hear her.

‘Get out of here, Kong. Out!’

She kept screaming this, or words to that effect, until their ears stopped ringing. When Minerva realized that Billy Kong was ignoring her commands, she switched to Taiwanese.

‘I told my father not to employ you. You are an impulsive and violent man. We are conducting a scientific experiment here. This demon is of no use to me if he is dead; do you understand, you reckless man? I need to communicate with our guest, so you must leave, because you obviously terrify him. Go now, I warn you, or your contract will be terminated.’

Kong rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was taking every shred of patience he had not to dispose of this whingeing infant right now and take his chances with her security. But it would be foolhardy to risk everything because he could not hold his temper for a few more hours. For now, he would have to content himself with some more insolence.

Kong took a small mirror from his trouser pocket and plucked at the gelled strands of his hair.

‘I will go now, little girl, but be careful how you speak to me. You may come to regret it.’

Minerva split the fingers of her right hand into a W.

‘Whatever,’ she said in English.

Kong pocketed his mirror, winked at N°1 and left. N°1 did not feel comforted by that wink. In the demon world, you winked at your opponent in pitched battle to make clear your intention to kill him next. N°1 got the distinct impression that this spiky-haired human had that same intention.

Minerva sighed, took a moment to compose herself, then resumed her interview with the prisoner.

‘Let’s start at the beginning. What is your name?’

N°1 supposed that was a safe question to answer. ‘I have no real name, because I never warped. I used to worry about that, but now I seem to have a lot more to worry about.’

Minerva realized that her questions would have to be quite specific.

‘What do people call you?’

‘You mean human people? Or other demons?’

‘Demons.’

‘Oh... right. They call me Number One.’

‘Number One?’

‘That’s right. It’s not much of a name, but it’s all I have. And I console myself with the fact that it’s better than Number Two.’

‘I see. Well then, Number One, I suppose you would like to know what’s going on here.’

Nº1's eyes were wide and pleading. 'Yes, please.'

'OK then,' Minerva began, as she sat facing her prisoner. 'Two years ago one of your pride materialized here. Just popped up in the middle of the night on the statue of D'Artagnan in the courtyard. He was lucky not to be killed actually. D'Artagnan's sword actually pierced one of his arms. The tip broke off inside.'

'Was the sword silver?' asked Nº1.

'Yes. Yes it was. Of course we realized later that the silver anchored him to this dimension, otherwise he would have been attracted to his own space and time. The demon was, of course, Abbot. My parents wanted to call the *gendarmes*, but I persuaded them to bring the poor half-dead beast inside. Papa has a small surgery here that he uses for his more paranoid patients. He treated Abbot's burns, but we missed the silver tip until a few weeks later when the wound became infected and Papa did an X-ray. Abbot was quite fascinating to observe. Initially, and for many days, he flew into a psychotic rage whenever a human approached him. He tried to kill us all and vowed that his army was coming to exterminate humankind from the face of the Earth. He conducted long arguments with himself. It was more than split personality. It was as if there were two people in one body. A warrior and a scientist. The warrior would rage and thrash, then the scientist would write calculations on the wall. I knew that I was on to something important here. Something revolutionary. I had discovered a new species, or rather rediscovered an old one. And if Abbot really was to bring a demon army, then it was up to me to save lives. Human and demon. But of course, I am merely a child so no one would listen to me. But if I could record this and present it to the Nobel Committee in Stockholm, I could win the physics prize and establish demons as a protected species. Saving a species would give me a certain satisfaction, and no child has ever won the prize before, not even the great Artemis Fowl.'

Something had been puzzling Nº1. 'Aren't you a little young to be studying other species? And you're a girl too. That pony offer made by the magic voice box sounded pretty good.'

Minerva had obviously come across this attitude before. 'Times are changing, demon,' she snapped. 'Children are a lot smarter than they used to be. We're writing books, mastering computers, tearing apart scientific myths. Did you know that most scientists won't even acknowledge the existence of magic? Once you add magic into the energy equation, nearly all the current laws of physics are shown to be seriously flawed.'

‘I see,’ said N°1, not convincing anyone.

‘I am exactly the right age for this project,’ added Minerva. ‘I am young enough to believe in magic and old enough to understand how it works. When I present you in Stockholm, and we put forward our thesis on time travel and magic as elemental energy, it will be a historic moment. The world will have to take magic seriously, and make ready for the invasion!’

‘There is no invasion,’ protested N°1.

Minerva smiled as a nursery school teacher would at a fibbing child. ‘I know all about it. Once Abbot’s warrior personality became dominant, he told us about the Battle of Tailte and how the demons would return and wage a terrible war with the Mud Men, as he called us. There was a lot of blood and hacking of limbs involved.’

N°1 nodded. That sounded like Abbot.

‘That’s what Abbot believed, but things have changed.’

‘I explained that to him. I explained that he had been flitting through time and space for ten thousand years, and that we had come a long way since then. There are more of us than there used to be, and we didn’t use crossbows any more.’

‘You didn’t? You don’t?’

‘You saw Mister Kong’s gun. That’s only a tiny example of the kind of weaponry we have. Even if your entire pride of demons arrived all together, armed to the teeth, it would take about ten minutes to have you all locked up.’

‘Is that what you’re going to do? Lock us up?’

‘That was the plan, yes,’ admitted Minerva. ‘As soon as Abbot realized that the demons could never beat us, he changed his tactics. He voluntarily explained the mechanics of the time tunnel to me and in return I gave him books to read and old weapons to examine. After a few days’ reading, he asked to be called Abbot, after General Leon Abbot in the book. I knew that once I presented Leon Abbot in Stockholm, it would be easy to get funding for an international task force. Whenever a demon popped up, we could tag him with silver and house him in an artificial demon community for study. Central Park Zoo was my preferred location.’

N^o1 ran the word *zoo* through his new lexicon. ‘Aren’t zoos for animals?’

Minerva gazed at her feet. ‘Yes. I am rethinking that, especially having met you. You seem quite civilized, not like that Abbot creature. He *was* an animal. When he arrived, we tended his wounds, nursed him back to health, and all he could do was try to eat us. We had no choice but to restrain him.’

‘So, you’re not going to lock us up in a zoo any more?’

‘Actually, I don’t have a choice. Judging by my calculations, the time tunnel is unravelling at both ends and deteriorating along the shaft. Soon, any calculations will be unreliable and it will be impossible to predict where or when demons will materialize. I’m afraid, Number One, that your pride doesn’t have long left before it disappears altogether.’

N^o1 was stunned. This was more information than anyone could absorb in one day. For some reason the demoness with the red markings flashed into his mind. ‘Isn’t there any way to help? We are intelligent beings, you know. Not animals.’

Minerva stood and paced, stretching one of her corkscrew curls.

‘I have been giving this some thought. There’s nothing that can be done without magic, and Abbot told me the warlocks all died in the transition.’

‘It’s true,’ said N^o1. He did not mention that he might be a warlock himself. Something told him that this was valuable information and it was not a good idea to reveal too much valuable information to a person who had tied you to a chair. He had said too much already.

‘Maybe if Abbot had known about the time spell, he wouldn’t have been so eager to get back to Hybras,’ mused Minerva. ‘Papa told him that there was a silver chip in his arm, and that very night he dug it out with his nails and disappeared. We have the whole thing on tape. I have wondered every day if he managed to make it home.’

‘He made it,’ said N^o1. ‘The time spell took him right back to the beginning. He never said anything about this place. Just turned up with the book and the crossbow, claiming to be our saviour. It was all lies.’

‘Well then,’ sighed Minerva, and she seemed genuinely sorry. ‘I don’t have a single idea about how to save the pride. Maybe your little friend in the next room can help when she

wakes up.'

'What little friend?' asked N^o1, puzzled.

'The one who knocked out Bobo, my brother. The little creature we captured trying to rescue you,' explained Minerva. 'Or, more accurately, trying to rescue an empty golf bag. She looks like a magical creature. Maybe she can help.'

Who would want to rescue a golf bag? wondered N^o1.

The door opened a crack, and Juan Soto's head appeared in the gap.

'Minerva?'

'Not now,' snapped Minerva, waving at the man to go away.

'There's a call for you.'

'I'm not available. Take a number.'

The security guard persisted; he stepped into the room, one hand cupped over the mouthpiece of a cordless phone.

'I think you might want to talk to this person. He says his name is Artemis Fowl.'

Minerva gave Soto her full attention.

'I'll take it,' she said, reaching for the phone.

The LEPrecon field helmet is an amazing piece of equipment. The Section Eight field helmet, on the other hand, is a miracle of modern science. To compare the two would be akin to comparing a flintlock to a laser-sighted sniper rifle.

Foaly had taken full advantage of his almost unlimited budget to indulge his every tech-head fantasy and stuff the helmet with every piece of diagnostic, surveillance, defence and just plain cool equipment he could cram in there.

The centaur was vocally proud of the entire package. But if forced to pick just one add-on to brag about, he would go for the bouncing bags every time.

Bouncing bags in themselves were not a recent addition. Even civilian helmets had gel bags in between their outer and inner shells, which provided a bit of extra buffering in case of a crash. But Foaly had replaced the helmet's rigid outer shell with a more yielding

polymer and then swapped the electro-sensitive gel for tiny electro-sensitive beads. The beads could be controlled with electronic pulses to expand, contract, roll or group, providing the helmet with a simple but highly effective propulsion system.

This little marvel can't fly but it can bounce wherever you want it to, Foaly had said earlier, when Holly was signing out her equipment. Only commanders get the flying helmets. I wouldn't recommend them though; the engine's field has been known to straighten perms. Not that I'm saying you have a perm. Or need one for that matter.

While N°1 was being interrogated by Minerva, Foaly was flexing his fingers over the remote controls for Holly's Section Eight helmet. At the moment, the helmet was locked in a wire mesh strongbox at the rear of the security office.

Foaly liked to sing a little ditty while he worked. In this instance the song was the Riverbend classic: 'If It Looks Like a Dwarf and Smells Like a Dwarf, Then It's Probably a Dwarf (or a Latrine Wearing Dungarees)'. This was a relatively short title for a Riverbend song, which was the fairy equivalent of human country and western.

'When I got an itch I can't scratch,
When there's a slug in my vole stew,
When I got sunburn on my bald patch,
That's when I remember you...'

Foaly had considerately switched off his mike, so Artemis would not have the chance to object to his singing. In fact, he was using an extremely old hard-wired antenna to send his signal, in the hope that no one in Police Plaza would pick up on his transmission. Haven City was in lockdown, and that meant no communications with the surface. Foaly was knowingly disobeying Commander Ark Sool's orders, and he was quite enjoying himself doing it.

The centaur donned a set of v-goggles through which he could see everything in the helmet's vista. Not only that, but the goggles' picture-in-picture facility gave him rear and side views from the helmet's cameras. Foaly already had control of the chateau's security systems; now he wanted to have a little peek through their computer files – something he could not do from Section Eight HQ, especially not with the LEP waiting to pounce on any

signal coming out of the city.

The helmet was naturally equipped with wireless omni-sensor capabilities, but the closer he could get to an actual hard drive, the quicker the job could be completed.

Foaly pressed a combination key command on his v-keyboard. To anyone watching, it would have seemed like the centaur was playing an invisible piano, but in fact the v-goggles interpreted the movements as key strokes. A small laser pencil popped out of a hidden compartment just above the right ear-cushion of Holly's helmet.

Foaly targeted the wire mesh box's locking mechanism.

'One second burst. Fire.' Nothing happened, so Foaly swore briefly, turned on his microphone, and tried it again.

'One second burst. Fire.'

This time, a red beam pulsed from the pencil's tip, and the lock melted into metallic mush.

Always good to have the equipment switched on, thought Foaly, glad that no one had witnessed his mistake, especially not Artemis Fowl.

Foaly targeted a desktop computer at the far side of the office with a glare and three blinks.

'Compute bounce,' he ordered the helmet, and almost immediately an animated dotted arrow appeared on the screen, dipping once to the floor and then rising to the computer desk.

'Execute bounce,' said Foaly and smiled as his creation rolled into life. The helmet hit the floor with a basketball *ping* then bounced across the room, directly on to the computer desk.

'Perfect, you genius,' said Foaly, congratulating himself. Sometimes his own achievements brought a tear to his eye.

I wish Caballine could have seen that, he thought. And then, *Wow, I must be getting serious about this girl.*

Caballine was a centaur he had bumped into at a gallery downtown. She was a researcher with PPTV by day and a sculptor by night. A very smart lady and she knew all about Foaly. Apparently, Caballine was a big fan of the mood blanket, a multi-sensor

massage and homeopathic garment designed by Foaly specifically for centaurs. So they talked about that for half an hour. One thing led to another, and now he found himself jogging with her every evening. Whenever there wasn't an emergency.

Which there is now! he reminded himself, turning his attention back to work.

The helmet was sitting next to the human computer keyboard, with its omni-sensor pointed directly at the hard drive.

Foaly stared at the hard drive and blinked three times, selecting it on the screen.

'Download all files from this and any networked computers,' instructed the centaur, and the helmet immediately began to suck information from the Apple Mac.

After several seconds, an animated bottle on the v-goggles screen was filled to the brim, and burped. Transfer completed. Now they could find out exactly how much information these humans had, and where they were getting it from. But there was still the matter of back-up files. This group could have burned their information on to CDs, or even sent it by email or stored it on the Internet.

Foaly used the virtual keyboard to open a data charge folder and send a virus into the human computer. The charge would completely wipe any computers on the network, but before that it would run along any Internet pathways explored by these humans and completely burn the sites. Foaly would like to be a bit more delicate about it and just erase fairy-related files, but he couldn't afford to take chances with this mysterious group. The mere fact that they had avoided detection for so long was proof that they were not to be trifled with.

This was a major virus to lob into a human system. It would probably crash thousands of sites, including Google or Yahoo, but Foaly didn't see that he had a choice.

On Foaly's screen, the data charge appeared as a red flickering flame that chuckled nastily as it dived into the omni-sensor's data stream. In five minutes, the Paradizos' hard drives would be burned beyond repair. And as an added bonus, the charge would also attach itself to any storage devices within the sensor's range that bore the network's signature. So any information stored on CDs or flashdrives would disintegrate as soon as someone tried to load them. It was potent stuff, and there wasn't a firewall or anti-virus that could stop it.

Artemis's voice issued from two gel speakers in jars on the desk, interrupting his concentration.

'There's a wall safe in the office. It's where Minerva keeps her notes. You need to burn anything inside it.'

'Wall safe,' replied Foaly. 'Let's see.'

The centaur ran an X-ray scan on the room and found the safe behind a row of shelving. Given the time, he would like to scan all the contents, but he had a rendezvous to keep. He sent a concentrated laser beam the width of a length of fishing line into the belly of the safe, reducing the contents to ash. Hopefully, he was destroying more than the family jewels.

The X-ray scan revealed nothing else promising so Foaly sent the helmet beads spinning, toppling Holly's helmet off the desk. In a display of keyboard virtuosity, Foaly used the laser to carve a section from the base of the office door while the helmet was in mid-air. In two choreographed bounces the helmet was through the section and into the corridor outside.

Foaly grinned, satisfied.

'Never even touched the wood,' he said.

The centaur called up a blueprint for the Chateau Paradizo and superimposed it over a grid on his screen. There were two dots on the grid. One was the helmet, and the other was Holly. It was time the two were reunited.

As he worked, Foaly unconsciously sang a verse of the Riverbend dirge.

'When my lucky numbers run out of luck,
When I'm stuck in the hole I tumbled into.
When my favourite dawg gets squashed by a truck,
That's when I think me some thoughts of you.'

On the planet's surface, Artemis winced as the song twanged through his tiny phone and along his thumb.

‘Please, Foaly,’ he said in pained tones, ‘I’m trying to negotiate on the other line.’

Foaly whinnied, surprised. He’d forgotten about Artemis.

‘Some people ain’t got no Riverbend in their souls,’ he said, switching off his microphone.

Billy Kong decided that he’d have a little word with the new prisoner. The female. If indeed she was female. How was he supposed to know for sure what class of a creature it was? It looked like a girl, but maybe demon girls weren’t the same as human ones. So, Billy Kong thought he might ask *it* what exactly *it* was, among other things. If the creature decided not to answer, Kong didn’t mind. There were ways to persuade people to talk. Asking them nicely was one way. Giving them candy was another. But Billy Kong preferred torture.

Back in the early eighties, when Billy Kong was still plain old Jonah Lee, he lived in the California beach town of Malibu with his mother, Annie, and big brother, Eric.

Annie worked two jobs to keep her boys in sneakers, so Jonah got left with Eric in the evenings. That should have worked out fine. Eric was sixteen and old enough to look after his kid brother. But like most sixteen-year-olds, he had more on his mind than little brothers. In fact, sitting with Jonah was seriously interfering with his social life.

The problem was, as Eric saw it, that Jonah was an outdoorsy kind of boy. As soon as Eric took off to hang out with his friends, Jonah would ignore his big brother’s orders and head out into the California evening. And outdoors in the city was no place for an eight-year-old. So what Eric needed to do was devise a strategy that kept Jonah indoors, and allowed him to roam free.

He came upon the perfect plan quite by accident one night, returning home after a late-night argument with his girlfriend’s other boyfriend and brothers.

For once, Jonah had not ventured out and was plonked in front of the TV watching horror shows on hacked cable. Eric, who had always been impulsive and reckless, had taken to sneaking around with the girlfriend of a local gangster. Now word had leaked out and the gang was after him. They had roughed him up a bit already, but he had got away. He was bloody and tired, but still kind of enjoying himself.

‘Lock the doors,’ he called to his little brother, startling him out of his TV stupor.

Jonah jumped to his feet, eyes widening as he noticed Eric’s bloodied nose and lip.

‘What happened to you?’

Eric grinned. He was that kind of person – exhausted, battered but buzzing with adrenaline.

‘I got... There was this bunch of...’

And then he stopped, because the spark of an idea was ricocheting around in his head. He must look pretty beat-up. Maybe he could use this to keep little Jonah indoors while Mom was working.

‘I can’t tell you,’ he said, dragging a smear of blood across his face with one sleeve. ‘I’ve sworn an oath. Just bolt the doors and close the shutters.’

Usually, Jonah didn’t have time for his brother’s theatrics, but tonight there was blood, and horror on the TV, and he could hear footsteps pounding up the driveway.

‘Dammit, they’ve found me,’ swore Eric, peeking through a shutter.

Little Jonah grabbed his brother’s sleeve.

‘Who’s found you, Eric? You gotta tell me.’

Eric appeared to consider it.

‘OK,’ he said finally. ‘I belong to a... uh... secret society. We fight a secret enemy.’

‘What, like a gang?’

‘No,’ said Eric. ‘We fight demons.’

‘Demons?’ said little Jonah, half sceptical, half scared out of his wits.

‘Yeah. They’re all over California. By day, they’re normal guys. Accountants and basketball players, stuff like that. But at night they peel off their skin and go hunting kids. Under tens.’

‘Under tens? Like me.’

‘Like you. Exactly like you. I found these demons chewing on a couple of twin girls. Maybe eight years old. I killed most of ’em, but a few must’ve followed me home. We gotta stay real quiet and they’ll go away.’

Jonah rushed for the phone. ‘We should call Mom.’

‘No!’ said Eric, snatching the phone. ‘You want to get Mom killed? Is that what you want?’

The idea of his mother dying started Jonah crying. ‘No. Mom can’t die.’

‘Exactly,’ said Eric gently. ‘You gotta leave the demon-slaying to me and my boys. When you’re fifteen, then you get to be sworn in, but until then, this is our secret. You stay in the house and let me do my duty. Promise?’

Jonah nodded, blubbering too much to say the word.

And so the brothers sat huddled on the sofa while Eric’s girlfriend’s boyfriend’s brothers battered on the windows and called him out.

This is a cruel trick, Eric thought. Maybe I’ll just let it run for a couple of months. It’ll keep the kid out of trouble until everything dies down.

The deception worked well. Jonah didn’t set foot outside the house after dusk for weeks. He sat on the settee, with his knees drawn to his chin, waiting for Eric to return with elaborate demon-slaying stories. Every night, he feared that his brother would not return, that the demons would kill him.

One night his fears came to pass. The cops said that Eric had been killed by a notorious gang of brothers who had been gunning for him. Something about a girl. But Jonah knew different. He knew the demons had done it. They had peeled off their faces and killed his brother.

So Jonah Lee, now known as Billy Kong, was going in to see Holly carrying the weight of his childhood memories. For the sake of his sanity, he had managed to convince himself over the decades that there were no demons, and that his beloved brother had lied to him. This betrayal had messed him up for years, preventing him forming lasting relationships, and making it a lot easier for him to hurt people. And now this crazy Minerva girl was paying him to help her hunt down actual demons, and it turns out they *are* real. He had seen them with his own eyes.

At this stage Billy Kong couldn’t tell fact from fiction. A part of him believed that he’d had a bad accident, and that all of this was coma hallucination. All Billy knew for sure was that if there was the slightest chance that these demons were the same ones who killed Eric, then they were going to pay.

Holly was not too happy playing the victim. She had enough of this in the Academy. Every time the curriculum threw up a role-playing game, Holly, as the only girl in that class, was picked to be the hostage, or the elf walking home alone, or the teller facing a bank robber. She tried to object that this was stereotyping, but the instructor replied that stereotypes were stereotypes for a reason, so get that blonde wig on. So when Artemis proposed that she allow herself to get caught, Holly took a bit of persuading. Now she was sitting tied to a wooden chair in a dark, damp basement room, waiting for some human to come and torture her. The next time Artemis had a plan involving someone being taken hostage, he could play the part himself. It was ridiculous. She was a captain in her eighties, and Artemis was a fourteen-year-old civilian, and yet he was dishing out the orders and she was taking them.

That's because Artemis is a tactical genius, said her sensible side.

Oh, shut up, responded her irritated side eloquently.

And then Billy Kong came into the room and proceeded to irritate Holly even further. He glided across the floor like a pale, hair-gelled ghost, circling Holly silently several times before speaking.

‘Tell me something, demon. Can you peel off your face?’

Holly met his eyes. ‘With what? My teeth? Hands tied, moron.’

Billy Kong sighed. Lately everyone under five feet seemed to think it was their prerogative to give him verbal abuse.

‘You probably know I’m not supposed to kill you,’ said Billy, teasing his hair into spikes. ‘But I often do things that I’m not supposed to.’

Holly decided to crack this human’s confidence a little.

‘I know that, Billy, or should I say, Jonah. You’ve done a lot of bad things over the years.’

Kong took a step back. ‘You know me?’

‘We know all about you, Billy. We’ve been watching you for years.’

This wasn’t strictly true, of course. Holly knew no more about Kong than Foaly had told

her. Perhaps she wouldn't have baited him if she'd known about his *demon* history.

To Billy Kong, this simple statement was confirmation of everything Eric had told him. Suddenly, the building blocks of his beliefs and understandings toppled and smashed beyond repair.

It was all true. Eric had not lied. Demons walked the Earth and his brother had tried to protect him and paid with his life.

'You remember my brother?' he asked, his voice shaking.

Holly presumed that this was a test. Foaly *had* mentioned a brother.

'Yes. I remember. Derek, wasn't it?'

Kong pulled a stiletto from his breast pocket, gripping it so tightly his knuckles whitened.

'Eric!' he shouted, spittle spraying from his mouth. 'It was Eric! Do you remember what happened to him?'

Holly felt suddenly nervous. This Mud Man was unstable. It would only take her a second to escape from these bonds, but maybe a second was too long. Artemis had requested that she remain bound for as long as possible, but from the look on Billy Kong's face it seemed as if staying bound could be a fatal mistake.

'Do you remember what happened to my brother?' asked Kong again, waving the knife like a conductor's baton.

'I remember,' said Holly. 'He died. Violently.'

Kong was thunderstruck. Reeling internally. For several moments he circled the room muttering to himself, which didn't encourage Holly any.

'It's true. Eric never betrayed me! My brother loved me. He loved me and *they* took him!'

Holly took advantage of this lack of focus to escape from the plastic ties binding her wrists. She did this using an old LEP trick taught to her by Commander Vinyáya back in the Academy. She rubbed her wrists against the rough edge, causing two small grazes. When magical sparks erupted from her fingertips to heal the wounds, she siphoned a few off to melt the plastic enough for her to yank her way out.

When Kong faced Holly again, she was untethered, but concealing the fact.

Kong knelt before her so their eyes were level. He was blinking rapidly and his pulse beat in a temple vein. He spoke slowly, in a voice fraught with barely repressed madness and violence. He had switched to Taiwanese, his family's first language.

'I want you to peel off your face. Right now.'

This, reasoned Kong, would be the final proof. If this demon could peel off her face, then he would stab her in the heart and damn the consequences.

'I can't,' said Holly. 'My hands are tied. Why don't you peel it off for me? We have new masks now. Disposable. They come off easily.'

Kong coughed in surprise, rocking back on his hunkers. Then he steadied himself and reached out shaking hands. His hands did not shake from fear, but from anger and sorrow that he had dishonoured his brother's memory by believing the worst of him.

'At the hairline,' said Holly. 'Just grab and pull; don't worry if you tear it.'

Kong looked up, and they made eye contact. This was all Holly needed to employ the magical fairy *mesmer*.

'Don't those arms feel heavy?' she asked, her voice layered and irresistible.

Kong's brow suddenly creased, and the creases filled with sweat.

'My arms. What? They're like lead. Like two lead pipes. I can't...'

Holly pushed the *mesmer* a little harder. 'Why don't you put them down. Take it easy. Sit on the floor.'

Kong sat on the concrete. 'I'm just going to sit for a second. We're still doing the face-peeling thing. But in a second. I'm tired.'

'You probably feel like talking.'

'You know what, demon. I feel like talking. What should we talk about?'

'This whole group you're involved with, Billy. The Paradizos. Tell me about them.'

Kong snorted. 'The Paradizos! You're only dealing with one Paradizo here. And that's the girl, Minerva. Her daddy is just a money man. If Minerva wants it, Gaspard pays for it. He's so proud of his little girl the genius that he does whatever she says. Can you believe that she convinced him to keep the whole demon thing quiet until after the Nobel Committee

get a look at her research?’

This was very good news. ‘You mean that no one outside this house knows about the demons?’

‘Hardly anybody *inside* the house knows. Minerva is paranoid that some other egghead will get hold of her work. The staff think we’re guarding a political prisoner who needs his face redone. Only Juan Soto, the chief of in-house security, and myself were told the truth.’

‘Does Minerva keep records?’

‘Records? She writes everything down, and I mean everything. We have records of every demon action, right down to toilet breaks. She’s got every twitch on video; the only reason that there’s no cameras down here is that we weren’t expecting anyone.’

‘Where does she keep these notes?’

‘A little wall safe in the security office. Minerva thinks I don’t know the combination, but I do. Bobo’s birthday.’

Holly touched a skin-coloured microphone pad glued to her throat. ‘A wall safe in the security office,’ she said clearly. ‘I hope you’re getting that.’

There was no reply. Wearing an earpiece had been too risky, so Holly had to make do with the mike pad on her neck, and iris-cam suckered like a contact lens over her right eye.

Kong still felt like talking. ‘You know, I’m going to kill all of you demons. I’ve got a plan. Real clever too. Miss Minerva thinks that she’s going to Stockholm, but that’s never going to happen. I’m just waiting for the right moment. I know that silver is the only thing keeping you in this dimension. So, I’m going to send you back and give you a little present to take with you.’

Not if I can help it, thought Holly.

Kong half smiled at her. ‘Are we doing the face-peeling thing? Can you really do that?’

‘Of course I can,’ said Holly. ‘Are you sure you want to see it?’

Kong nodded, slack-jawed.

‘OK, then. Watch carefully.’

Holly raised her hands to her face, and when she took them away, her head had

disappeared. Her body and limbs quickly followed suit.

‘Not only can I peel off my face,’ said Holly’s voice from thin air. ‘I can do my entire body.’

‘It’s true,’ croaked Kong. ‘It’s all true.’

Then a tiny invisible fist swished through the air, knocking him into unconsciousness. Billy Kong lay on the concrete floor dreaming that he was Jonah Lee once more, and his brother stood before him saying: *I told you so, bro. I told you there were demons. They murdered me back in Malibu. So what are you going to do about it?*

And little Jonah answered: *I’m working on it, Eric.*

*

Minerva accepted the phone from the security guard.

‘Minerva Paradizo speaking.’

‘Minerva, this is Artemis Fowl,’ said a voice in perfect French. ‘We met once across a crowded room in Sicily.’

‘I know who you are; we nearly met in Barcelona too. And I know it’s really you. I memorized your voice pattern and cadence from a lecture you gave on Balkan politics two years ago at Trinity College.’

‘Very good. I find it strange that I haven’t heard of you.’

Minerva smiled. ‘I am not as careless as you, Artemis. I prefer anonymity, until I have something exceptional to be recognized for.’

‘The existence of demons, for instance,’ prompted Artemis. ‘That *would* be exceptional.’

Minerva gripped the phone tightly. ‘Yes, Master Fowl. It would be exceptional. It *is* exceptional. So you can keep your Irish paws off my research. The last thing I need is for some bigheaded teenage boy to hijack all my work at the last second. You had your own demon, but that wasn’t enough; you had to try and steal mine too. The moment I recognized you in Barcelona, I knew you would be after my research subject. I knew you would try to smoke us out, have someone hide in the car. It was the logical thing to do, so I booby-trapped the vehicle. You knocked out my baby brother too. How could you?’

‘Apparently, I did you a favour,’ said Artemis lightly. ‘Little Bobo is obnoxious by all accounts.’

‘Is that why you called me? To insult my family?’

‘No,’ replied Artemis. ‘I do apologize; that was juvenile. I called you to try and make you see sense. There is much more at stake here than a Nobel Prize, not to belittle the prize, of course.’

Minerva smiled knowingly. ‘Artemis Fowl, whatever your pretence, you called me because your plan failed. I have your demon and you want her back. But if it makes you feel better, please proceed with your *good of humanity* speech.’

Outside, on the bluff overlooking Chateau Paradizo, Artemis frowned. This girl reminded him a lot of himself eighteen months ago, when achievement and acquisition were everything, and family and friends were secondary. Honesty, on this occasion, actually was the best policy.

‘Miss Paradizo,’ he said gently. ‘Minerva. Listen to me for a few moments – you will feel the truth of what I say.’

Minerva tutted. ‘Why is that? Because we’re connected?’

‘Actually, we are. We are similar people. Both the most intelligent person in whatever room we happen to be in. Both constantly underestimated. Both determined to shine brightest in whichever discipline we pursue. Both dogged by scorn and loneliness.’

‘Ridiculous,’ scoffed Minerva, but her protestations rang hollow. ‘I am not lonely. I have my work.’

Artemis persisted. ‘I know how it feels, Minerva. And let me tell you, no matter how many prizes you win, no matter how many theorems you prove, it will not be enough to make people like you.’

‘Oh, spare me your amateur psychology lectures. You’re not even three years older than me.’

Artemis was injured. ‘Hardly amateur. And for your information, age is often detrimental to intelligence. I have written a paper on the subject in *Psychology Today*, under the pseudonym Doctor C. Niall DeMencha.’

Minerva giggled. 'I get it. Senile Dementia. Very good.'

Artemis himself smiled. 'You are the first person to get that.'

'I always am.'

'Me too.'

'Don't you find that tiresome?'

'Incredibly. I mean, what is wrong with people? Everybody says that I have no sense of humour, then I construct a perfectly sound pun round a well-known psychological condition and it is ignored. People should be rolling in the aisles.'

'Absolutely,' agreed Minerva. 'That happens to me all the time.'

'I know. I loved that *Murray Gell-Mann kidnapping a quark* joke that you did on the train. Very clever analogy.'

The congenial conversation ground to a frosty halt.

'How did you hear that? How long have you been spying on me?'

Artemis was quietly stunned. He had not meant to reveal that fact. It was most unlike him to chatter on about trifles when there were lives at stake. But he liked this Minerva girl. She was so like him.

'There was a security camera in the corridor, on the train. I procured the tape, had it enhanced and read your lips.'

'Hmm,' said Minerva. 'I don't remember a camera.'

'It was there. Inside a red plastic bubble. Fisheye lens. I apologize for the intrusion of your privacy, but it was an emergency.'

Minerva was silent for a moment. 'Artemis. We could have a lot to talk about. I haven't talked this much with a boy in... well, ever. But I have to finish this project. Can you call me again in six weeks?'

'Six weeks will be too late. The world will be a different place and possibly not a better one.'

'Artemis. Stop it. I was just beginning to like you, and now we're back where we started.'

‘Just give me one more minute,’ Artemis insisted. ‘If I can’t convince you in a single minute, then I will hang up and leave you to your research.’

‘Fifty-nine,’ said Minerva. ‘Fifty-eight...’

Artemis wondered if all girls were so emotional. Holly could be this way too. Warm one moment and icy the next.

‘You are holding two creatures captive. Both sentient. Neither human. If you expose either one to the wider scientific community, then their kind will be hunted down. You will be responsible for the extinction of at least one species. Is that what you want?’

‘That’s what they want,’ retorted Minerva. ‘The first one we rescued threatened to kill us all, and possibly eat us. He said that the demons would return and wipe out the human scourge.’

‘I know all about Abbot,’ said Artemis, using what he had learned from Minerva’s own surveillance cameras. ‘He was a dinosaur. Demons could never take on humans now. Judging by my temporal calculations, Abbot was whisked ten thousand years into his own future and then sent back again. Declaring war on demons would be like declaring war on monkeys. In fact, monkeys would be a bigger threat. There are more of them. And anyway, the demons can’t even fully materialize unless we shoot them full of silver.’

‘I am sure they will find a way around that. Or one could get through accidentally, just like Abbot, then open the gates for the rest of them.’

‘Highly unlikely. I mean really, Minerva, what are the odds?’

‘So, Artemis Fowl wants me to forget all about my Nobel project and turn my demon captives loose.’

‘Forget the project certainly,’ said Artemis, checking his watch. ‘But I don’t think there is any need for you to set your captives free.’

‘Oh, really? And why is that?’

‘Because I imagine they are already gone.’

Minerva spun round to face the spot where N^o1 had been sitting. It was empty: her captive demon had disappeared along with his chair. A perfunctory sweep told her the entire room was empty, except for her.

‘Where is he, Artemis?’ she screamed into the phone. ‘Where is my prize?’

‘Forget about all of this,’ said Artemis softly. ‘It’s not worth it. Take it from someone who has made your mistakes. I will call you soon.’

Minerva squeezed the phone as though it were Artemis’s neck.

‘You tricked me!’ she said, the truth suddenly dawning on her. ‘You *allowed* me to capture your demon!’

But Artemis did not reply. He had reluctantly closed his fist on the conversation. Generally, outsmarting someone gave him a warm and fuzzy feeling, but hoodwinking Minerva Paradizo just made him feel like a sneak. It was ironic that he felt like a bad guy, now that he was almost a good guy.

Butler glanced across at him from his perch on the knoll.

‘How did that go?’ he asked. ‘Your first lengthy conversation with a girl your own age?’

‘Fabulous,’ said Artemis, voice dripping with sarcasm. ‘We’re planning a June wedding.’

CHAPTER 9: TURNED TABLES

CHATEAU PARADIZO



WHEN Holly Short had opened the door of her makeshift basement cell, she found her helmet bouncing on the spot in front of her with a three-dimensional image of Foaly's face projected on to it.

'That is really creepy,' she said. 'Couldn't you just text me?'

Foaly had included a three-dimensional help program in Holly's helmet's computer. It came as no surprise to Holly that he had given the help module his own features.

'I've lost some weight since this model was constructed,' said Foaly's image. 'I've been jogging. Every evening.'

'Focus,' Holly ordered.

Holly dipped her chin and Foaly bounced the helmet on to her head. She sealed it tight.

'Where is the demon?'

'Straight up the stairs. Second on the left,' answered Foaly.

'Good. You've wiped our patterns from the security system?'

'Of course. The demon is invisible, and you can't be picked up no matter what kind of lens they use.'

Holly jumped up the human-sized steps. It would have been easier to fly, but she had left her wings outside, along with her suit computer. There had been no need to risk placing them in human hands, other than Artemis's. And even that took a little thinking about.

She hurried along the corridor, past the first door on the left and crept through the open doorway of the second, taking in the situation with a quick scan of the room.

The demon was secured on a chair, and the human girl was on the phone facing away

from him. There was a large two-way mirror on the wall. Holly used her thermal scan to ascertain that the adjoining room had one occupant – a large male. He appeared to be talking on his mobile phone, not facing the demon's cell.

‘Should I stun her?’ asked Foaly hopefully. ‘She knocked you out with sleeping gas.’ He was quite enjoying playing with his new toy. It was like a first-person computer game.

‘I wasn't actually unconscious,’ said Holly, her words contained by the helmet's seal. ‘I was holding my breath. Artemis had told me that she would use gas. The first thing I did was vent the vehicle.’

‘What about that Mud Man next door?’ persisted Foaly. ‘I can focus the laser through the glass. It's quite clever really.’

‘Shut up or you will pay for it when I get home,’ warned Holly. ‘We only shoot in an emergency.’

Holly skirted Minerva, careful to avoid brushing against the Mud Girl or treading on a loose board. A single creak now could scupper all their plans. She squatted before the little demon, who did not seem too worried about his plight. What he was actually doing was listing off words, and having a little giggle after every one.

‘Cornucopia, oh very good,’ he said. And then, ‘Sanitary. I like that one. Hee hee.’

Marvellous, thought Holly. This demon obviously lost a few brain cells in the transfer. She used voice command to type a text on her visor.

‘Nod if you can read this,’ the text read. To the demon, the words appeared floating in space before him.

‘Nod if you can...’ He mouthed, then stopped and began nodding furiously.

‘Stop nodding!’ sent Holly. ‘I am an elf. One of the first family of fairies. I am here to rescue you. Do you understand?’

No response, so Holly sent a command. ‘Nod once if you understand.’

A single nod from the demon.

‘Good. All you need to do is stay very still and quiet.’

Another nod. The little demon was catching on.

Foaly had transferred his image to the inside of Holly's visor.

'Ready?' asked the centaur.

'Yep. You keep an eye on the Mud Man next door. If he turns round, then you can stun him.'

Holly wiggled her hand up her right sleeve, pinching a sheet of foil between her index and middle fingers. This is not as easy as it sounds when a fairy is shielded and vibrating at speeds faster than the human eye can follow. It was made easier by the Section Eight suit, which reduced the amount of vibration necessary. Holly pulled out and unfolded a large square of cam foil that automatically projected a fair approximation of what should be behind it. Each bead on the cam foil was actually a fairy-made multifaceted diamond that could reflect accurately no matter what the viewing angle was.

She backed up close to N°1, then held up the sheet of foil. The foil was equipped with multi-sensor technology, so it was a simple matter for Foaly to wipe N°1 from the projection. To Minerva it would seem that her demon captive had simply vanished. To N°1 it would seem like nothing whatsoever was happening, and that this was the lamest rescue in the history of rescues.

Seconds later, Minerva turned quickly to face them.

N°1 nodded hello, and was amazed to find that she could not see him.

'Where is he, Artemis?' the girl screamed into her phone. 'Where is my prize?'

N°1 thought about saying *I'm right here!* but decided against it.

'You tricked me!' squealed Minerva. 'You *allowed* me to capture your demon!'

Finally, the penny drops, thought Holly. *Now go and search the chateau like a good girl.*

Minerva obligingly stalked out of the room, yelling for her father. Next door, Papa Paradizo, hearing his daughter's screams, closed his phone and began to turn...

Foaly activated the helmet laser and shot him in the chest. He tumbled to the floor and lay in a heap, his chest heaving with the slow breaths of the unconscious.

'Sweet,' crowed the centaur. 'Did you see that? Not so much as a smudge on the glass.'

'He was heading for the door!' objected Holly, dropping the cam foil.

‘He was coming to the glass. I had to stun him.’

‘We will talk about this later, Foaly. I do not like your new gung-ho attitude.’

‘Caballine likes me to be masterful. She calls me her stallion.’

‘Who? Listen, just stop talking!’ hissed Holly, melting N°1’s bonds with two sharp laser bursts.

‘Free!’ exclaimed the imp, jumping to his feet. ‘Liberated. Unbound. Without restrictions.’

Holly shut off her shield, revealing herself to N°1.

‘I hope that’s a helmet,’ said N°1.

Holly touched a button and her visor slid up. ‘Yes. I am a fairy just like you. Just a different family.’

‘An elf!’ exclaimed N°1 delightedly. ‘An actual elf. I hear you cook your food and like music. Is that true?’

‘Occasionally, when we’re not trying to escape from murderous humans.’

‘Oh, they’re not murderous, pugnacious, homicidal, or even bellicose.’

‘Maybe not the one you met. But there’s a guy with funny hair in the basement. And believe me, when he wakes up he’s going to be murderous and all those other things you mentioned.’

N°1 remembered Billy Kong; he had no desire to meet him again.

‘Very well, elf. What next?’

‘Call me Holly.’

‘I am Number One. So what next, Holly?’

‘Next, we escape. There are friends waiting for us... eh... Number One.’

‘Friends?’ said N°1. He knew the word, of course, but never imagined it could apply to him. It was a warming notion, even in these dire straits.

‘What do I do?’

Holly wrapped the cam foil round him like a shawl.

‘Keep this on. It will cover most of you.’

‘Amazing,’ said N°1. ‘A cloak of invisibility.’

Foaly moaned in Holly’s ear. ‘A cloak of invisibility? That is a highly sensitive piece of field equipment. What does he think? Some warlock pulled it out of his armpit?’

Holly ignored the centaur, something that was becoming a habit.

‘Hold the foil close with one hand. Hang on to my belt with the other. We need to get out of here quickly. I only have enough magic left for a few minutes’ shielding. Ready?’

N°1’s anxious features peeped out from a shawl of invisibility.

‘Hold the foil. Hang on to the belt. Got it.’

‘Good. Foaly, watch our backs. Let’s move out.’

Holly shielded, then hurried out of the open door, pulling N°1 behind her. The corridor was lined with tall potted plants and lush oils, including a Matisse. Holly could hear the humans shouting in adjacent rooms. There was activity all around them, and it could only be seconds before some Mud Men spilled into this corridor.

N°1 struggled to keep up, his little legs stumbling along behind the super-fit elfin captain. It seemed impossible that they could escape. All around was the clatter of approaching footsteps. N°1, slightly distracted, snagged a toe on the cam foil and trampled it underfoot. The foil’s electronics crackled and died. The demon was as visible as a blood stain on a patch of snow.

‘We lost the foil,’ said Foaly.

Holly clenched her fingers. She missed her handgun.

‘OK. Nothing to do but make a run for it. Foaly, you have free rein, if you’ll pardon the horse analogy.’

‘Finally,’ whinnied the centaur. ‘I added a game-pod joystick to my controls. A bit unorthodox, but very accurate. We’ve got hostiles converging from all sides. My advice is to take the direct route. Go to the end of the corridor and follow our friend Doodah’s path out of the window. Butler will cover you once you’re in the open.’

‘OK. Hold on, Number One; whatever happens, don’t let go.’

The first threat came from ahead. Two security guards rounded the corner, guns extended.

Ex-police, Holly guessed. *Covering the diagonals.*

The men were shocked to see N^o1. Obviously, they were not in the need-to-know loop.

‘What the hell?’ said one.

The other kept his nerve. ‘Hold it right there.’

Foaly hit them both in the chest with fat laser bursts. The energy sank through their clothes and they slid down the wall.

‘Unconscious,’ panted N^o1. ‘Comatose, cataleptic, out for the count.’ He realized that this vocabulary-spouting was a good way to deal with stress.

‘Stress. Pressure, strain and anxiety.’

Holly dragged N^o1 onwards, towards the still open window. More guards came from the side corridors, and Foaly dispatched them efficiently.

‘I should get bonus points for this,’ he said. ‘Or at the very least a free life.’

There were two more guards in the sitting room, sneaking an espresso. Foaly dropped them where they stood. And then flashed out a fan laser burst to evaporate the coffee before it hit the rug.

‘It’s Tunisian,’ he explained. ‘Very difficult to get coffee out. Now they can just suck up the grains.’

Holly stepped down into the room.

‘Sometimes I think you don’t quite get the gravity of field missions,’ she said, skirting a massive velvet sofa.

N^o1 stumbled down the human-sized steps after his rescuer. In spite of all his new vocabulary, the imp was not quite sure how he was feeling.

Scared, of course. Big Mud Men with fire weapons and all that. Excited too. Being rescued by some kind of elf superhero, who was invisible too. Pain in the leg, don’t forget that. The angry human had shot him in the leg, with a silver bullet, no doubt. But N^o1 realized that one feeling was missing from the melting pot. One that had been strong within him for as

long as he could remember. Uncertainty. In spite of the frantic antics unfolding all around, he felt more at home on this planet than he ever had on Hybras.

A bullet whistled past his ear.

Then again, maybe Hybras hadn't been so bad.

'Wake up, Foaly!' admonished Holly. 'You're supposed to be watching our backs.'

'Sorry,' said the centaur, swivelling the laser and strobing the doorway. The female guard smiled broadly then collapsed. On the ground she began singing a nursery rhyme about doggies and their bones.

'Bizarre,' said Foaly. 'That guard is singing.'

'Often happens,' grunted Holly, clambering on to the window sill. 'The laser knocks out some functions, but sometimes awakens others.'

Interesting, thought the centaur. *A happy gun. Certainly worth investigating.*

Holly reached down and grasped N^o1's wrist, pulling him over the sill. She was dismayed to see that her own arms were not as invisible as she would have hoped. Her magic was wearing thin. Shielding was a real power siphon. She would flicker into visibility soon whether they were safely away or not.

'Nearly there,' she said.

'Just across the wide open green space, is it?' said N^o1, displaying a real gift for sarcasm.

'I like him,' said Foaly.

They tumbled out on to the lawn. The alarm was well and truly raised now, and guards poured from the various doors like beads from a ruptured beanbag.

'Go crazy, Foaly,' said Holly. 'And take out their vehicles too.'

'Yes sir, ma'am,' said Foaly and began firing.

Holly ran flat out, pulling the imp behind her. There was no time to consider his physical abilities; either he kept up or he got dragged. The laser pencil on her helmet flashed out burst after burst, swivelling in wide arcs to cover the approaching guards. Holly felt the weapon's heat on the crown of her head and resolved to mention the helmet's supposedly revolutionary cooling system to Foaly if they ever made it out of this.

The centaur was too busy for chat now. All Holly could hear through her headset was grunting and whinnying as Foaly concentrated on his job. He was not concerned about pinpoint accuracy any more; there were too many things to shoot. He sent out scything fans of energy that socked half a dozen guards per burst. The guards would be perfectly fine in half an hour, though some might experience headaches, hair loss, irritability, loss of bowel control and other assorted side effects for a few days.

Foaly targeted the four-wheel drives next, firing several pulses into each petrol tank. The BMWs exploded in sequence, turning spectacular fiery cartwheels. The force of the blast cupped Holly and N°1 like a giant hand, scooting them on their way a little faster. Holly's helmet protected her from the noise, but poor N°1's head would ring for quite a while.

Thick black smoke billowed from cracked engines and prowled across the tended garden, more effective than any smoke grenade. Holly and N°1 raced just ahead of the smoke line towards the main gates.

'Gates,' Holly panted into her microphone.

'I see them,' said Foaly, melting the wrought-iron barriers right off their hinges. They collapsed to the ground with a big bell *bong*.

A rented MPV skidded to a halt outside the pillars, and the passenger door slid open.

Artemis was inside, reaching out to N°1.

'Come on,' he said urgently. 'Get in.'

'Arrgh!' said N°1. 'A human!'

Holly leaped inside the vehicle, dragging N°1 with her.

'It's OK,' she said, switching off her shield to conserve the little that was left. 'He's a friend.'

N°1 clung to Holly's back, trying not to throw up. He glanced towards the front of the MPV where Butler sat.

'What about him? Please tell me he's a friend too.'

Holly grinned, climbing on to a seat. 'Yes, he's a friend. The very best.'

Butler yanked the gear stick into 'Drive'. 'Buckle up, boys and girls. We're about to be in

a car chase.'

The sun was setting as Butler expertly steered the car round the natural chicanes of the Route de Vence. The road was hewn from the mountainside, with stone villas teetering above and the Gorge du Loup yawning below. It took a skilled driver to negotiate the bends at speed, but Butler had once driven an Al Fahd armoured vehicle through a crowded Cairo market, so the Alpine roads were not too much of a challenge for him.

As it turned out, there was no car chase. The Paradizo fleet lay in flaming, mangled, inverted heaps in the chateau driveway. There was not so much as a moped left intact to tail the getaway car.

Butler checked the rear-view mirror constantly, and only allowed himself a satisfied grin when they passed through the toll station at Cagnes sur Mer.

'We're clear,' he pronounced, accelerating into the motorway's fast lane. 'There's not a vehicle intact on that estate, including little Beau's toy car.'

Artemis smiled, giddy with success. 'Perhaps we should have left them Mister Day's marvellous booster.'

Holly noticed that N^o1 was happily examining his seat belt.

'Buckle up,' she said, slotting the buckle into its catch.

'Buckle,' said N^o1. 'Clasp, clip, fastener. Why are you with these humans?'

'They're going to help you,' explained Holly gently.

N^o1 had a million questions, and knew exactly how to phrase every one of them. But for the moment, words took a back seat to pictures, and N^o1's square impish jaw dropped further and further as he stared through the tinted glass, absorbing the wonders of the modern motorway.

Holly took the opportunity to catch up with events.

'Doodah and Mulch got away OK?'

'Yes,' confirmed Artemis. 'Foaly was anxious to have the shuttle returned, as he had

taken it without clearance. We shouldn't be more than a few hours behind them. By the time you get to the shuttle port, the shutdown should be lifted. I wouldn't be surprised if you've earned yourself a medal, Holly. Job spectacularly well done.'

'There are still loose ends.'

'True. But nothing an LEP mind-wipe team can't take care of. There is no physical evidence that anything other than humans caused this devastation.'

Holly leaned back against the seat. 'I'm forgetting something.'

'You're forgetting the demons. Their spell is disintegrating. Their island will be lost in time. Will be, or has been. They drift in and out of time, making contact like a bouncing ball.'

Nº1 picked up on one word. 'Disintegrating?'

'Hybras is doomed,' said Artemis frankly. 'Your home will shortly be dragged through the time tunnel along with everything on it. When I say *shortly*, I mean at our end. At your end it could have already happened, or maybe it will happen in a million years.' He extended his hand. 'And by the way, my name is Artemis Fowl.'

Nº1 took the hand, nibbling the forefinger as was the demon custom.

'I am Number One. Imp. Isn't there something we can do to save Hybras?'

'Hardly,' replied Artemis, retrieving his finger and checking it for bite marks. 'The only way to save Hybras is to bring it back to Earth under controlled circumstances. Sadly, the only people who could have done that were the warlocks, and they are all dead.'

Nº1 chewed his lip. 'Em, well, I'm not too sure, but I might be a warlock. I can speak in tongues.'

Artemis sat forward, straining his seat belt. 'Speaking in tongues could be merely an aptitude. What else can you do?'

'Again, not positive about this, but I may have, possibly, turned wood to stone.'

'The gargoyle's touch. Now that is interesting. You know, Number One, there's something about you. Those markings. You seem familiar to me.' Artemis frowned, irritated that he couldn't quite place the memory. 'We haven't met before; I would certainly remember.'

Nevertheless, there is something...’

‘These markings are quite common, especially the forehead hex. Demons often think they know me. Now, about saving Hybras?’

Artemis nodded. ‘Of course. The best course of action is to get you below ground. I only dabble in magical theory; Foaly has live experts just dying to examine you. I feel confident that the LEP can come up with a plan to save your island.’

‘Really?’

Butler interrupted from the front of the car, saving Artemis from answering.

‘We have a bit of a situation at Chateau Paradizo,’ he said, tapping the screen of a compact laptop suckered to the dashboard. ‘Maybe you’d better take a look.’

The bodyguard passed the computer over his shoulder. The screen was divided into a dozen boxes, the security feed from Chateau Paradizo, still being supplied by Foaly’s data twist.

Artemis balanced the laptop on his knees, his bright eyes flickering across the screen.

‘Oh dear,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘This is not good.’

Holly swapped seats, so she could see the screen.

‘Not good at all,’ she said.

Nº1 was not too worried about the computer. As far as he was concerned it was just a little box.

‘Not good,’ he mused, accessing the dictionary in his head. ‘A synonym for *bad*.’

Artemis did not look up from the screen. ‘That’s exactly right, Number One. This is bad. *Very* bad.’

CHAPTER 10: KONG THE KING

CHATEAU PARADIZO



MINERVA Paradizo was simply furious. That odious Fowl boy had somehow stolen her research subject from right under her nose. And after all the money Papa had spent on security, even hiring that despicable Mister Kong. Sometimes Minerva wondered if all males were boors, except Papa, of course.

The grounds were a mess. Master Fowl had left quite a trail of destruction in his wake. The cars were so much scrap metal. The lawns were ploughed deep enough to plant vegetables, and the stink of smoke and oil had penetrated every corner of every room. Only a hurried phone call to the police station in Vence and a few improvised fabrications about a generator accident had prevented the arrival of a police car.

Once the fires were under control, Minerva called a staff meeting on the patio. Juan Soto, the security chief, her father, Gaspard, and of course Billy Kong were in attendance. Mister Kong seemed more agitated than usual.

‘Demons,’ muttered the Malibu native. ‘True, all true. I have a responsibility to my brother. Finish what he started.’

If Minerva had been paying attention to Billy Kong’s words, she might have noticed a touch of the ominous about them, but Minerva was busy worrying about her own problems. And in Minerva’s opinion, her own problems were far more important than anyone else’s.

‘Can we focus here, everyone? You may have noticed that my project is in crisis.’

Gaspard Paradizo had just about had it with Minerva’s *project*. So far, he had indulged her to the tune of one and a half million euros, but now his entire estate had been trashed. It really was too much.

‘Minerva, *chérie*,’ he said, smoothing back his silver hair. ‘I think we need to take a step back from this. Perhaps quit while we’re not too far behind.’

‘Quit, Papa? Quit? While Artemis Fowl conducts a parallel project? I think not.’

Gaspard spoke again, this time with a little iron in his tone. ‘You think not, Minerva?’

Minerva blushed. ‘Sorry, Papa. I am infuriated, that’s all. This Irish boy swans in here with his troops, and just like that, ruins all our work. It is unbearable, no?’

Gaspard was seated, as they all were, at a wrought-iron table on the rear patio overlooking the pool. He pushed back his chair and circled the table to his daughter’s seat. From her vantage point there was a spectacular view over the wooded gorge and down into Antibes. Nobody was very interested in the view on this evening.

‘I think, Minerva,’ he said, hunkering down beside her, ‘that we have gone too far in this matter. There are otherworldly forces at work here. Danger follows these creatures, and I can no longer allow you to place yourself, or others, in harm’s way. We fought a noble fight, and I am so proud of you that my heart may burst, but now this must become a government matter.’

‘It can’t, Papa,’ said Minerva petulantly. ‘We have no records. No sources. Nothing. All our computer files and disks were destroyed. They even drilled the safe and burned everything in it. I think Artemis Fowl crashed Google and Yahoo. It’s hopeless. How would it look, a little girl turning up at the Department of Defence wittering on about monsters in the basement? I need evidence.’

Gaspard stood, his knees cracking. ‘Evidence, little one? These are not criminals. I watched you talk with our visitor. He was alert, intelligent; he had done nothing wrong. He was not an animal. It is one thing to present the Nobel Committee with proof of an invasion through time, but quite another to hound innocent sentient creatures.’

‘But, Papa!’ Minerva pleaded. ‘One more try. I need a month to rebuild my time-tunnel model, then I can make a materialization prediction.’

Gaspard kissed his daughter on the forehead. ‘Look into your heart, my little genius. What does it tell you to do?’

Minerva scowled. ‘Look into my heart? Honestly, Papa, I am not a Care Bear.’

‘Please, *chérie*,’ said her father. ‘You know I love you, and I respect your genius, but just for once, couldn’t we go with the pony option? Couldn’t I just get Justin Timber-guy to play

at your birthday party?’

Minerva fumed for several moments, but she knew Papa was right. She had no business detaining intelligent creatures. It was cruelty, nothing less. Especially when they intended no harm. But she could not just give up. Minerva silently resolved that Artemis Fowl would be her next project. She would find out all about the Irish boy, and what he knew of demons.

‘Very well, Papa,’ she sighed. ‘For you, I will forego my Nobel Prize. This year, at any rate.’

Next year will be different, she thought. When I know what Artemis Fowl knows. There are whole worlds just beyond my grasp.

Gaspard embraced his daughter warmly. ‘Good. It is for the best.’

The surgeon returned to his seat.

‘Now. Mister Soto: damage report.’

The Spanish security chief consulted his clipboard.

‘I have only a preliminary report, Monsieur Paradizo. I suspect we will be finding damage for many weeks. The vehicles are completely destroyed. Thankfully, we do have war-zone insurance so we should have new cars within five working days. There is shrapnel in the pool. One piece pierced the skimmer and the wall, so we have a leak and no filtration. I know a man in Tourrettes sur Loup. Very reasonable and he can keep his mouth shut.’

‘How about the men?’

Soto shook his head. ‘I don’t know what they hit us with. Some kind of ray gun. Like Martians. Anyway, most of the men are up and about. A few have headaches. No other side effects except for Thierry, who has spent the past half an hour in the toilet. We hear the odd scream...’

Suddenly, Billy Kong emerged from his mumbling daydream, slamming his palm on to the glass-topped iron table.

‘No. This will not do. Absolutely not. I need another demon.’

Gaspard frowned. ‘That unhappy experiment is over. I should never have allowed it. I

was blinded by pride and ambition. There will be no more demons in this house.'

'Unacceptable,' said Kong, as though he were the employer and not the employee. 'Eric's work must be completed. I owe him that much.'

'Now listen here, Mister,' said Soto sternly. 'What you find unacceptable is hardly an issue. You and your men were subcontracted to do a job, and that job does not include pronouncements on what is acceptable and what is not.'

As he spoke, Kong checked his hair in the small mirror he carried everywhere.

'You need to understand a few things, Paradizo. First, you are not in charge here. Not really. Not since my men and I joined your little group. Second, I don't generally work on this side of the law. My speciality is taking whatever I want by any means necessary. I only signed on for babysitting duty because I owe these demons a little payback. A lot of payback, actually. I know little Minerva just wanted to take photos of her guests and ask them a lot of psych questions, but I have my own plan for them. Something a little more painful.'

Gaspard turned his head towards Soto.

'Mister Soto. Do you have a response to this outrageous statement?'

'I do indeed,' blustered Juan Soto. 'How dare you speak to Monsieur Paradizo in this fashion. You are an employee here, that is all. As a matter of fact, you are no longer an employee. Your contract is terminated. You have one hour to vacate your room and be off the premises.'

Billy Kong's grin was as dangerous as a shark's. 'Or else what?'

'Or else my guards will remove you. I would remind you that there are only four men in your group and five times that number in mine.'

Kong winked at him. 'Perhaps. But my four are the best.'

He flipped his jacket lapel to reveal a small clip-on microphone.

'I am moving up the schedule,' he said into the mike. 'Open the horse.'

Soto was puzzled.

What was this idiot talking about? Horses?

‘Where did you get that microphone? Is that from the strongbox? Channels are to be kept clear for official transmissions.’

But Minerva caught the *Iliad* reference. *Opening the horse* could only refer to the Wooden Horse of Troy. Kong had planted traitors in the camp.

‘Papa,’ she said urgently. ‘We must leave.’

‘Leave? This is my house. I have agreed to almost everything you have asked of me, *chérie*, but this is ridiculous...’

Minerva pushed back her chair, racing round the table.

‘Please, Papa. We are in danger here.’

Soto tutted. ‘Mademoiselle is in no danger. My men will protect you. Perhaps the strain of the day has made you irritable. Maybe you should take a nap.’

Minerva scowled in frustration. ‘Can’t you see what is happening here? Mister Kong has given a signal to his men. Possibly they are already in charge. He has come among us as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

Gaspard Paradizo was well aware of his daughter’s intelligence.

‘Soto? Is this possible?’

‘Impossible!’ declared Juan Soto, but behind his enraged blushes was a tinge of pallor. Something about Kong’s grinning calmness unnerved him. And, truth be told, he was not quite the soldier that his résumé declared him to be. True, he had spent a year with the Spanish peacekeeping force in Namibia, but he’d been attached to a journalist for the entire tour and had never participated in any action. He had got by in this job with mere bluster and a rudimentary knowledge of weaponry and tactics. But if someone were to come along who actually knew what he was talking about...

Soto reached to his belt, snicking off a walkie-talkie.

‘Impossible,’ he repeated. ‘But to reassure you, I will double the guard and instruct my team to be on alert.’ He clicked the ‘Talk’ button. ‘Report in pairs. From the top.’

Soto released the button, filling the air with static. The empty hiss seemed more ominous than a ghost’s howl. This went on for several seconds. Soto tried valiantly to maintain a jaunty confidence, but was betrayed by a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead.

'Equipment malfunction,' he said weakly.

Billy Kong shook his head.

'Two shots,' he said into his lapel mike.

Barely a second later, two sharp cracks echoed across the estate.

Kong grinned. 'Confirmation,' he said. 'I'm in control here.'

Soto had often wondered how he would react if faced with actual danger. Earlier, when he had believed that they were under siege, he had panicked slightly, but followed procedure. This was different.

Soto went for his gun. A practised pistol man could do this without looking down. Soto was not practised enough. By the time he glanced towards his holster, Kong had already leaped on to the table and knocked Soto unconscious.

The security chief keeled over backwards with a dainty sigh.

Kong sat atop the table, elbows resting on knees.

'I need that demon back,' he said, casually drawing a stiletto blade from a secret pocket in the sleeve of his jacket. 'How do we find him?'

Gaspard Paradizo smothered Minerva in his arms. Protecting every inch of his daughter.

'If you hurt her, Kong...'

Billy Kong rolled his eyes. 'No time for negotiations, Doctor.'

He twirled the blade between his fingertips, then snapped his wrist, flicking the stiletto at Gaspard. The weapon's handle thunked against the doctor's forehead, and he fell away from Minerva like a discarded coat.

Minerva knelt, cradling her father's head.

'Papa? Wake up, Papa.' For a moment she was a little girl, then her intellect kicked in. She checked her father's pulse and tapped the point of impact with her index and middle fingers.

'You are lucky, Mister Kong, not to be facing a murder charge.'

Kong shrugged. 'I've faced them before. It's amazing how easy it is to elude the

authorities. It costs exactly ten thousand dollars. Three for the face job, two for new papers and five for a really good hacker to create a computer past for you.'

'Nevertheless, one more half-revolution of your blade and my father would be dead, and not merely unconscious.'

Kong pulled a second blade from his sleeve pocket. 'There's still time. Now, tell me how we go about finding our little friend.'

Minerva stood facing Kong, her fists clenched defiantly.

'Listen to me, idiot. That demon is gone. I have no doubt that his benefactors plucked the silver bullet from his leg as soon as they had him in the car. He is back on his island. Forget about him.'

Kong frowned. 'It makes sense. That's what I would do. Well, OK then, when is the next materialization?'

Minerva should have been terrified. Her ability to do anything besides witter and sob should have deserted her. After all, her father was lying unconscious, and the man who had put him in that state was sitting on her patio table, brandishing a knife. But Minerva Paradizo was no ordinary twelve-year-old. She had always displayed remarkable composure in times of stress. So, even though she *was* scared, Minerva was more than capable of communicating her scorn to Billy Kong.

'Where have you been for the past thirty minutes?' she asked, then clicked her fingers. 'Of course — asleep. I believe you people call it *neutralized*. And by a tiny demoness too. Well, let me fill you in on what's happened. Our entire operation has been *neutralized*. I have no research, no calculations and no subject. I am starting from scratch. In fact, I wish I was starting from scratch. Starting from scratch would be a dream come true. Last time I was handed the time-tunnel calculations; this time I have to work them out by myself. Now don't get me wrong, I could do it. I am a genius after all, but it will take at least seventeen months. At the very least. *Comprenez-vous*, Monsieur Kong?'

Billy Kong understood all right. He understood that this little pain in the rear was trying to blind him with science.

'Seventeen months, eh? How long if you had some incentive?'

‘Incentive won’t change the laws of science.’

Kong leaped down from the table, landing soundlessly on the balls of his feet. ‘I thought that was your speciality – changing the laws of science. Wasn’t this project all about proving how every other scientist in the world is a dummy, except you?’

‘It’s not that simple...’

Kong began flipping his knife, catching it without so much as a glance at the blade. End over end it twirled, a silver fan in the air. Hypnotic.

‘I’m making it simple. I think you *can* get me a demon, and I think you can do it in less than seventeen months. So, here’s what I am going to do.’ He leaned down and heaved Juan Soto’s chair upright. The security chief slumped forward on to the table.

‘I am going to hurt Mister Soto. Simple as that. There is nothing you can do to stop that happening. This is a demonstration of my earnestness. It connects you with the reality of your situation. And then you know I mean business. So, after that, you start talking. And if you don’t start talking, then we move on to lucky contestant number two.’

Minerva had no doubt that contestant number two was her father.

‘Please, Mister Kong, there is no need for any of this. I am telling you the truth.’

‘Oh, it’s *please* now, is it?’ said Kong in mock surprise. ‘And *Mister Kong* too. What happened to *idiot* and *moron*?’

‘Don’t kill him. He’s a nice man. He has a family.’

Kong grabbed a bunch of Soto’s hair, yanking his head back. The chief’s Adam’s apple stuck out like a plum.

‘He’s an incompetent,’ snarled Kong. ‘Look how easily your demon escaped. See how simple it was for me to take over.’

‘Let him live,’ pleaded Minerva. ‘My father has money.’ Kong sighed. ‘You’re just not getting it, are you? For a smart girl you can be pretty stupid a lot of the time. I don’t want money. I want a demon. Now stop talking and pay attention. There is no point in trying to negotiate.’

Minerva’s heart sank as she realized just how far out of her depth she actually was. In less than an hour she had crossed over to a world of darkness and cruelty. And her own

arrogance had led her to it.

‘Please,’ she said. She struggled to maintain her composure. ‘Please.’

Kong adjusted his grip on the knife. ‘Don’t look away now, little girl. Watch and remember who’s boss.’

Minerva could not avert her eyes. Her gaze was trapped by this terrible tableau. It was like a scene from a scary movie, complete with its own soundtrack.

Minerva frowned. Real life did not have a soundtrack. There was music coming from somewhere.

The somewhere proved to be Kong’s trouser pocket. His polyphonic phone was playing ‘The Toreador Song’ from *Carmen*. Kong pulled the phone from his pocket.

‘Who is this?’ he snapped.

‘My name is not important,’ said a youthful voice. ‘The important thing is that I have something you want.’

‘How did you get this number?’

‘I have a friend,’ replied the mystery caller. ‘He knows all the numbers. Now, to business. I believe you’re in the market for a demon?’

*

Minutes earlier Butler had pulled off the motorway at the airport exit, and crammed himself into the back seat beside Artemis and Holly. They had watched the drama unfold in the Chateau Paradizo on their tiny laptop.

Artemis gripped his knees tight. ‘I can’t allow this. I won’t allow it.’

Holly placed a hand over his. ‘We have no choice, Artemis. We’re clear now. This is not our fight. I can’t risk exposing Number One.’

Artemis’s frown cut a furrow from his hairline to the bridge of his nose.

‘I know. Of course. But, still, how can this not be my fight?’ He glanced sharply at Butler. ‘Will Kong kill that man?’

‘Without a doubt,’ replied the bodyguard. ‘In his mind, it’s already done.’

Artemis rubbed his eyes, suddenly fatigued. 'I am responsible, indirectly. I can't have a man's death on my conscience. Holly, you do what you have to do, but I need to save those people.'

'Conscience,' said N^o1. 'What a lovely word. The *sh* in the middle.'

It was plain that the imp was not actually listening to the conversation, just picking up on certain words. The incongruity of this simple statement made Artemis look across. His eyes rested for a moment on N^o1's chest markings. And suddenly he knew where he had seen them before. A plan hit him like a bolt of lightning.

'Holly, do you trust me?'

Holly groaned. 'Artemis, don't ask me that. I just know one of your outrageous plans is coming.'

'Do you trust me?'

'Yes,' Holly sighed. 'I do. More than anyone.'

'Well then, trust me to get us all out of this. I will explain later.'

Holly was torn. This decision could affect the rest of her life, and the imp's too. And the effect could be to shorten them dramatically.

'OK, Artemis. But I'll be watching.'

Artemis spoke into his ring-phone. 'Foaly, can you put me through to Mister Kong's mobile phone.'

'Not a problem,' replied the centaur from Section Eight HQ. 'But it's going to be the last thing I do for you. Sool has tracked my line out. In thirty seconds I'm going to be shut down, and you'll be on your own.'

'I understand. Put me through.'

Butler gripped Artemis's shoulder. 'If you call him, then he has the upper hand. Kong will want to choose where to meet.'

'I know where we should meet. I just have to convince Mister Kong that the rendezvous point is his idea.' Artemis closed his fist, covering the phone. 'Quiet. It's ringing.'

‘Who is this?’ snapped Kong.

‘My name is not important,’ said Artemis. ‘The important thing is that I have something you want.’

‘How did you get this number?’

‘I have a friend,’ replied the mystery caller. ‘He knows all the numbers. Now, to business. I believe you’re in the market for a demon?’

‘So, you must be the great Artemis Fowl: Minerva’s idol. I am so sick of you smart kids. Why can’t you just boost cars or steal stuff like normal kids.’

‘We *do* steal stuff. Just *bigger* stuff. Now, are you interested in my demon or not?’

‘I could be,’ said Kong. ‘What do you have in mind?’

‘A straight trade. I pick a public place and we swap. My demon for your girl.’

‘You’re not picking anything, kid. I pick the rendezvous point. You called me, remember? What do you want with this girl anyway?’

‘Her life,’ said Artemis simply. ‘I do not like murder or murderers. You and your crew walk out of there with one hostage, and we do a swap. It’s a simple transaction. Don’t tell me you’ve never released a hostage before.’

‘I’m an old hand, kid. I’ve been picking up ransoms for years.’

‘Good. I’m glad we can do business. Now, why don’t you name your preferred location. I’ll be wearing a burgundy tie. Pay attention to that. There are a hundred and one ways this could go wrong. If it does, the police could tie one of us up for a long time.’

In the getaway car, Holly frowned quizzically at Artemis. It wasn’t like him to chatter. He calmed her with a look and a wave of his hand.

‘OK,’ said Kong. ‘I just thought of somewhere. You know Taipei 101?’

‘In Taiwan?’ said Artemis. ‘One of the world’s tallest buildings? You are not serious. That’s on the far side of the world.’

‘I am deadly serious. Taipei is my second home. I know it well. You will have a tough enough time getting there by the deadline, so there will be no tricks. We will exchange on

the observation deck at twelve noon, two days from now. If you don't show, then the girl takes the express elevator down. If you see what I mean.'

'I see. I'll be there.'

'Good. Don't come alone. Bring the ugly guy with you, or the female. I don't care, I only need one.'

'We have already released the female.'

'OK. The guy then. You see how easy it is to deal with me. I'm a reasonable man, unless I'm crossed. So don't cross me.'

'Don't worry,' said Artemis. 'I won't.'

And he said it with such conviction that, if you didn't know him, you would absolutely believe it.

CHAPTER 11: A LONG WAY DOWN

TAIPEI, TAIWAN



TAIPEI 101 is among the tallest buildings in the world. Some say it is the tallest, if the sixty-metre spire can be counted, but others argue that a spire is not a building, and so Taipei 101 can technically only be called the tallest *structure* in the world. In any event, there were four buildings in construction – two in Asia, one in Africa and the fourth in Saudi Arabia – with their sights set on the world’s tallest building crown. So Taipei’s claim to fame could be a fleeting one.

Artemis and company landed in Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport barely three hours before the deadline in a rented Lear jet. And though Butler was a registered pilot, qualified for day and night flying in various aircraft, it was Artemis who flew most of the way.

Flying helped him think, he claimed. Also, no one would interrupt while he put the finishing touches to his audacious plan. Artemis was fully aware of the risks involved with this particular scheme. The pivotal element was purely theoretical and the rest was highly unlikely.

He briefed the others on the details in the back of a rented Lexus on the forty-minute drive from the airport to downtown Taipei. The entire group looked drained, even though they had eaten and rested on the plane. Only N^o1 was in high spirits. Everywhere he looked there were new wonders to be gaped at, and he could not imagine that anyone would be able to injure him while he was under Butler’s protection.

‘The bad news is that we are running close to the deadline,’ said Artemis. ‘So there will be no time to set a trap.’

‘And the good news, Artemis?’ said Holly grumpily. She was grumpy for a few reasons. She was dressed as a human girl, because Artemis had asked her to save her magic for when it would be needed. She had managed to boost her magical energy by burying a

sealed acorn she kept round her neck, but there had been no full moon, so her power reserves were limited. Also she was completely shut off from the People, and to top it all she had no doubt that Ark Sool would have her up on charges if any of them did manage to survive the trade-off. After all, she had brought N°1 halfway across the world instead of escorting him safely to Haven City.

‘The good news is that Kong can’t be too far ahead of us, so it is unlikely he had time to set up any traps either.’

The Lexus entered the Xinyi district, and Taipei 101 rose from the cityscape like a giant bamboo shoot. The buildings around it seemed to shrink back in awe.

Butler craned his head back to see the top of the five-hundred-plus-metre building. ‘We never do anything small, do we? Why can’t we for once have a meeting in a Starbucks?’

‘I didn’t pick this building,’ said Artemis. ‘It picked us. Fate has brought us here.’

He tapped Butler on the shoulder and the bodyguard pulled over into the first space he could find. It took forever. Taipei morning traffic was thick and slow-moving and spewed smoke like an irritated dragon. Many of the thousands of pedestrians and cyclists had smog masks strapped across their faces.

When the vehicle had stopped, Artemis continued his briefing.

‘Taipei 101 is a miracle of modern engineering. The architects took their inspiration from the humble bamboo. But this shape alone would not keep the skyscraper steady in the event of an earthquake or high winds, so the designers built it on a frame of concrete-filled, steel-boxed super columns, and installed a seven-hundred-tonne steel ball as a mass damper pendulum to absorb the force of the wind. Ingenious. The pendulum swings instead of the building. It’s become quite the tourist attraction. You can even watch it from the observation deck. The owners have covered the damper with fifteen centimetres of solid silver, which has been etched by the famous Taiwanese artist Alexander Chou.’

‘Thanks for the fine-art lesson,’ interrupted Holly. ‘Now how about you let us in on your plan. I want to get this over with and take off this ridiculous tracksuit. It’s so shiny, I feel sure I can be picked up on satellite.’

‘I don’t much like this outfit either,’ complained N°1, who was dressed in a bonnet and an orange floral muumuu. Orange, he had decided, was definitely not for him.

‘Your outfit is the least of your worries,’ noted Holly. ‘I’m guessing that we’re about to hand you over to a bloodthirsty hit man, eh, Artemis?’

‘That we are,’ confirmed Artemis. ‘But only for a few seconds. There will be little or no danger to you. And if my suspicions are correct, it is just possible that we may save Hybras.’

‘Go back to me being in danger for a few seconds,’ said N^o1, his thick brow folding in a frown. ‘In Hybras, a few seconds can last a very long time.’

‘Not here,’ said Artemis, in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. ‘Here *a few seconds* is how long it will take you to open your hand.’

N^o1 opened his fingers a couple of times experimentally. ‘That’s still pretty long. Any way to cut it down?’

‘Not really. If we do, it means sacrificing Minerva.’

‘Well, she did tie me to a chair.’ N^o1 glanced round at the shocked faces. ‘What? I’m joking. Of course I’ll do it. But no more orange. Please.’

Artemis smiled, but it did not quite reach his eyes. ‘Very well, no more orange. Now, the plan. It is in two parts. If the first part doesn’t work, then the second is redundant.’

‘Redundant,’ said N^o1, almost unconsciously. ‘Not needed, superfluous.’

‘Exactly. So I’ll explain that when necessary.’

‘What about the first part?’ asked Holly.

‘In the first part, we meet a vicious hit man and his band of thugs and he will expect us to hand over Number One.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We hand over Number One,’ said Artemis. He turned to the slightly nervous imp. ‘How do you like the plan so far?’

‘Well, I don’t like the first bit and I don’t know the last bit. So, I’m really hoping the middle bit is exceptional.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Artemis. ‘It is.’

The group took a high-speed lift from Taipei 101's cavernous lobby to the observation floor. Holly and N°1 had technically been given permission to enter the building by a small plaque over the main door which simply urged visitors to come and go as they pleased. And seeing as she did not feel the urge to throw up in the lift, Holly guessed that the plaque counted as an invitation.

'Toshiba lifts,' said Artemis, reading from a pamphlet he had picked up at information. 'These are the fastest lifts in the world. We are moving at eighteen metres per second, so it shouldn't take much more than half a minute to reach the eighty-ninth floor.'

Artemis consulted his watch when the doors dinged open.

'Hmm. Right on time. Impressive engineering. I may get one of these for the house.'

They stepped out into the observation area, which had a restaurant at the far end. From this lofty vantage point, visitors could walk all the way round the floor and shoot video of the panoramic view. From this height it was even possible to see China across the Taiwan Strait.

For a moment the group forgot their worries and allowed themselves to be awestruck by the grace of this enormous structure. The sky was outside the window and blended almost seamlessly with the sea on the horizon. N°1 was especially dumbfounded. He turned in small circles, the muumuu swishing round his legs.

'Less of the pirouetting, little man,' advised Butler, the first to get his mind back on the job. 'You're showing your legs. And pull that bonnet down over your face.'

N°1 obliged, though he was not happy with the bonnet. It was shapeless and saggy, and made his head look like a bag of washing.

'Good luck, Holly,' said Artemis, into thin air. 'We will meet you on the twenty-third floor.'

'Get this done as quickly as you can,' Holly whispered into his ear. 'I don't have enough magic for a long shield. I'm barely invisible as it is.'

'Understood,' said Artemis, from the side of his mouth.

The small band walked slowly towards the bar area and took a table below the enormous mass damper, suspended a metre above the eighty-ninth floor. The seven-hundred-tonne

ball was a sight to behold, like an indoor moon, its surface etched with traditional Yuanzhumin drawings.

‘This is the legend of Nian,’ explained Artemis casually, while Butler scanned the room. ‘A ferocious beast that would feed on human flesh each New Year’s Eve. To scare Nian away, torches were lit and firecrackers were set off, because Nian was known to fear the colour red. Thus the splashes of red paint. It seems likely from the pictures that Nian was actually a troll. Chou must have based his work on contemporary accounts.’

A waitress came to their table.

‘*Li ho bo*,’ said Artemis. ‘Can we have a pot of Oolong tea. Organic, if you have it.’

The waitress blinked at Artemis, then looked up at Butler, who was still standing.

‘You are Mister Fowl?’ she asked, in excellent English.

‘I am *Master* Fowl,’ said Artemis, tapping the table for attention. ‘Do you have something for me?’

The waitress passed him a napkin.

‘From the gentleman along the bar,’ she said.

Artemis glanced down the arc of the metal railing and buffer system which kept patrons away from the mass damper, and more importantly kept the mass damper away from them.

Billy Kong was seated a dozen tables down, waggling his eyebrows in their direction. He was not alone. No one else was eyebrow-waggling, but three men were at the table with him, and several others were dotted around the bar area. Minerva was on Kong’s knee. He held her fast by the forearm. Her shoulders were tense but there was defiance in the set of her mouth.

‘Well?’ Artemis said to Butler.

‘At least twelve,’ replied the bodyguard. ‘Billy must have friends in Taiwan.’

‘None of them invisible, thank goodness,’ said Artemis, opening the napkin.

Send the creature to the reserved table, read the message on the napkin. I will send the girl. No tricks or people will get hurt.

He passed the napkin to Butler. ‘What do you think?’

Butler gave the message a summary glance. ‘I think he won’t try anything here. Too many cameras. If the security doesn’t get him on film, a tourist will. If Kong goes for a double-cross, it will be outside.’

‘And by then, it should be too late.’

‘So we hope.’

The waitress returned with a bamboo tray, bearing a clay pot of tea and three glasses. Artemis took his time pouring himself some of the steaming liquid.

‘How are you feeling, Number One?’

‘My leg hurts a bit.’

‘The painkiller is wearing off. I’ll ask Butler to give you another shot later. Are you ready to go? Everything will be fine, I assure you.’

‘All I have to do is open my hand?’

‘As soon as we’re in the lift.’

‘That’s it? Do you want me to distract the bad man with some witty banter, like you do with Holly?’

‘No. That won’t be necessary. Just open your hand.’

‘Should I look scared?’

‘That would be appropriate.’

‘Good. Shouldn’t be a problem.’

Butler was functioning in full action mode. Generally, he reined himself in, walking with a slight stoop to avoid drawing attention. But now, he stood tall and tensed, ready to spring into action. His gaze was fierce, and muscles bulged in his neck. He caught Billy Kong’s gaze and zeroed in on his eyeballs. Even across a crowded room, the hostility was almost palpable. A couple of more psychically sensitive bystanders suddenly felt anxious and cast their eyes about for the nearest public toilet.

When he was finished staring down Billy Kong, Butler knelt to give final instructions to N°1.

‘All you have to do is walk down to that table with the reserved sign. Wait until Minerva gets there, then continue on to Kong. If they hustle you out straight away, count to twenty then open your hand. If they wait for us to leave, open your hand when the lift doors have closed. Understand?’

‘I understand everything. In any language you care to speak in.’

‘Are you set?’

N^o1 took a deep breath. He could feel his tail vibrating anxiously. He had been in a bit of a daze since the time tunnel. How could anyone take all of this in? Skyscrapers, for heaven’s sake. Buildings that actually scraped the sky.

‘I’m set,’ he said.

‘Off you go then. Good luck.’

N^o1 began his long, lonely walk back into captivity. Scores of humans thronged around him, excited, sweating, chewing things, pointing machines at each other.

Those would be cameras, I suppose.

The noon sun flashed through the ceiling-to-floor windows, catching on the silver of the mass damper, lighting it up like a disco ball. The tabletops loomed just above head height. Waiters and waitresses bustled past with loaded trays. Glasses fell; children screamed.

Too many people, thought N^o1. I miss demons. Even Abbot. Well, OK, maybe not Abbot.

N^o1 reached the reserved table. He had to stand on tippy-toes to see the folded piece of card with the word printed on it. He lifted the flap on his bonnet to get a clear look. He was beginning to realize that a muumuu and bonnet were not typical Mud Child garb, as Artemis had told him.

This is a terrible disguise. I look like a freak. Surely someone will see that I am not human. I wish I could shield, like Holly.

Unfortunately, even if N^o1 could control his burgeoning magical powers, shielding had never been a weapon in the demon warlock arsenal.

N^o1 took a step to the right, squinting past the glare of the giant mass damper. Minerva was on her way down. Taking small careful steps towards the reserved table. Behind her,

Kong leaned forward in his seat, toes tapping with excitement and anticipation. He was like a dog on a leash with the scent of a fox in his nose.

Minerva arrived. She lifted the brim of N^o1's bonnet to check it was him.

'It's not my bonnet,' said N^o1. 'And this is certainly not my muumuu.'

Minerva took his hand. Before the abduction she had been eighty per cent genius and twenty per cent twelve-year-old girl. Now it was about fifty-fifty. 'I'm sorry for everything. For tying you up, and the rest. I thought you would try to eat me.'

'We're not all savages,' said N^o1. 'And my wrists did hurt for ages. But I forgive you, I suppose. As long as your tying-up days are over.'

'Yes. I promise.' Minerva looked over N^o1's head, towards Artemis's table. 'Why is he helping me? Do you know?'

N^o1 shrugged. 'I'm not sure. Holly, our friend, said it was something about puberty. Apparently, you're pretty, though to be honest, I can't see it myself.'

Their conversation was interrupted by a whistle from further down the bar. Billy Kong was growing impatient. The ex-Paradizo employee beckoned N^o1 on with his index finger.

'I should go. Leave. Depart.'

Minerva nodded. 'OK. Be careful. I will see you soon. Where is it? In your hand?'

'Yes,' said N^o1 automatically. Then, 'How did you know?'

Minerva walked on slowly. 'Genius. Can't help it.'

This place is littered with genii, thought N^o1. I just hope Mister Kong isn't another one.

He continued on his way, being careful to keep his feet and hands inside the muumuu. The last thing he wanted to do was cause a panic by exposing his grey stumpy digits. Although, perhaps the humans would bow down and adore him. After all, he was incredibly handsome compared to their own gangly males.

Billy Kong was all smiles when N^o1 reached the table. On *his* face, a smile looked like the first symptom of a disease. His hair was spiked in perfect points. Even in the middle of a kidnapping, Kong still made time for hair. Good grooming says a lot about a person.

'Welcome back, demon,' he said, grabbing a hank of the muumuu. 'So nice to see you. If

it is you...'

'If it is me?' said N°1, confused. 'Me is all I can be.'

'Excuse me if I don't take your word for it,' snorted Kong, tugging back the bonnet's frill for a quick peek at N°1's face. 'If that Fowl kid is half as smart as I've heard, then he's sure to be trying something.'

Kong examined the imp's face, poking the plate on his forehead, pulling back the lips to check the pink gums and square white teeth. Finally, he traced the rune on N°1's forehead with a finger, to make sure it wasn't painted on.

'Satisfied?'

'Pretty much. I guess little Artemis didn't have time to do a switch. I ran him too hard.'

'You ran us all too hard,' complained N°1. 'We had to fly here in a machine. I saw the moon close up.'

'You're breaking my heart, demon. After what you did to my brother, you're lucky to be alive. Something I hope to remedy in the next few minutes.'

N°1 twisted his head to catch a glimpse of the lifts. Artemis, Butler and Minerva were two steps away from the doors.

'Don't look at them. They can't help you. Nobody can help you.'

Kong clicked his fingers, and a muscular man joined them at the table. He was hefting a large metal suitcase.

'In case you're wondering, this is a bomb. You know what a bomb is, don't you?'

'Bomb,' said N°1. 'Explosive. Incendiary device.' His eyes widened. 'But that could hurt someone. A lot of some-ones.'

'Exactly. Not humans though. Demons. I am going to strap this on to you, set the timer, then send you back to your island. The blast should at the very least put a big dent in the demon population. You won't be crossing over here for your little night-time hunts for quite a while.'

'I won't do it,' said N°1, actually stamping his foot.

Kong laughed. 'Are you sure you're a demon? From what I hear, the last one was more...

demonic.'

'I am a demon. A warlock demon.'

Kong leaned close enough for N°1 to smell his citrus aftershave. 'Well, little Mister Warlock, maybe you can turn this bomb into a bunch of flowers, but I doubt it.'

'I don't have to do anything, because you can't make me go back to Hybras.'

Kong took a set of handcuffs from his pocket. 'On the contrary. I know exactly what to do. I picked up a thing or two in the chateau. All we have to do is dig that silver slug out of your leg, and Hybras will suck you home.'

N°1 glanced again towards the lift. The doors were closing on his new friends.

'You mean this silver slug?' he asked, showing Kong what had been concealed in his hand.

'He took it out,' breathed Billy Kong. 'Fowl took out the slug.'

'Took it out,' agreed N°1. 'Extracted. Removed.'

Then he dropped the silver nugget and disappeared.

Holly had been crouched on the mass damper watching events unfold. So far, everything had gone according to plan. Minerva had reached Artemis, and Butler had hustled them both to the lift. At the other end of the bar, Billy Kong was doing his whole grinning psycho bit. When this was all over, that Mud Man would have to be mind-wiped. There would be quite a few loose ends to clear up, actually. Not by her, though – she was not LEP any more. After this she would be lucky to be Section Eight.

Holly tapped a button on her wrist computer, zooming in on N°1. The imp raised his left hand. The signal. This was it. Time to test theories. It was either hello again or goodbye forever.

Artemis's plan was a risky one because his calculations were theoretical, but it was the only chance to save the demon island. And Artemis had been right so far. If Holly had to rely on someone's theories, she would prefer those theories to be Artemis Fowl's.

As Holly watched N^o1 drop the silver slug and disappear, she could not resist snapping a photo of Kong's face with her helmet camera. His reaction was priceless. They would have a good laugh over that later.

Then she activated her wings, rising above the giant silver ball, watching for signs.

Seconds later, a faint blue electrical rectangle began spinning at the silver ball's crown, exactly where Artemis had known it would. N^o1 was coming back. Just as Artemis had predicted.

Such a large mass of silver within three metres should interrupt N^o1's journey home. It should cause a momentary materialization at the summit, where the damper's energy field is most concentrated. You, Holly, have to be there to make sure this momentary materialization becomes more permanent.

On the mass damper, N^o1's shape was visible inside the glowing rectangle. He seemed a little confused, as though half asleep. One arm snaked through into this world, grasping at reality. It was enough for Holly. She darted down and clamped a silver bracelet round N^o1's grey wrist. The ghostly fingers wiggled, then solidified. Solidity sped along N^o1's arm like grey paint, rescuing him from Limbo. In seconds, where there had only been space, now crouched a shivering creature.

'Did I go?' asked the little imp. 'Am I back?'

'Yes and yes,' said Holly. 'Now stay quiet and still. We have to get you out of here.'

The mass damper swung slowly, dissipating the wind power buffeting Taipei 101. Holly leaned into the sway, grabbed hold of N^o1 and took off vertically, careful to keep her cargo shielded by the seven-hundred-tonne silver ball.

The next floor up was another observation floor, but it was closed for decoration. A single workman was slicing carpet for a corner section, and he did not seem surprised to see a muumuu-clad imp come sailing over the railing.

'Hey,' he said. 'It's an imp in a muumuu. You know something, imp?'

N^o1 landed on the floor with a thump. 'No,' he said cautiously. 'Tell me something.'

'I am not a bit surprised to see you,' said the man. 'In fact, you are so unremarkable that I am going to forget all about you as soon as you've gone.'

Nº1 picked himself up, straightening his bonnet. ‘You’ve had a talk with him, I see.’

Holly switched off her shield, speckling into view. ‘I gave him a blast of the *mesmer*.’ She peered over the railing down into the restaurant. ‘Come here, Number One. You’ll enjoy this.’

Nº1 placed his fingers against the glass. Kong and his cronies were creating chaos below, blundering towards the lifts. Kong was particularly perturbed, barging tourists from his path and overturning tables.

‘We probably don’t have time for this,’ said Nº1.

‘Probably not,’ agreed Holly. Neither fairy moved.

‘Hey, look,’ said the workman. ‘Another fairy. How utterly unremarkable.’

Only when the Toshiba lift doors had closed behind Billy Kong and his crew did Holly turn to leave.

‘Where to now?’ asked Nº1, wiping a happy-tear from his eye.

‘Now, we go to stage two,’ replied Holly, calling the lift. ‘Time to save Hybras.’

‘Never a dull moment,’ said Nº1, scurrying into the metal box. ‘Hey, my first cliché.’

Artemis and Butler had watched Minerva cross the restaurant towards them. She bore herself with considerable courage under the circumstances. Her chin was up and she had a determined look in her eye.

‘Butler, can I ask you something?’ said Artemis.

Butler was trying to keep an eye on every single person in the restaurant.

‘I’m a little busy at the moment, Artemis.’

‘Nothing taxing. Just a “yes” or “no” answer. Is it normal, during puberty, to feel these blasted feelings of attraction at stressful times? During a ransom drop, for instance.’

‘She’s pretty, isn’t she?’

‘Extremely. And funny too – remember that quark joke?’

‘I do. We must have a talk about jokes someday. Perhaps Minerva could sit in. And in response to your question, it is normal. The more stressful the situation, the more your body pumps out the hormones.’

‘Good. Normal then. Back to business.’

Minerva didn’t rush. She picked her way around tourists and tables as she walked steadily towards them.

When she drew level, Butler placed a guiding and protective hand on her back.

‘Get kidnapped every day, do you?’ he growled, steering her to the lift.

Artemis followed, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure they were not being pursued. Kong was not even looking at them, so happy was he with his prize.

The lift opened and the trio stepped inside. On the lift wall, the floor light was rapidly winking downwards.

Artemis held out his hand to Minerva. ‘Artemis Fowl the Second. Pleased to meet you finally.’

Minerva shook the hand warmly. ‘Minerva Paradizo. Likewise. You gave up your demon for me. I do appreciate it.’ She blushed slightly.

The lift slowed to a smooth stop, and the steel doors slid open with barely a hiss.

Minerva peeked out. ‘This is not the lobby. Why aren’t we leaving?’

Artemis stepped out on to the fortieth floor. ‘Our work here is not finished. I need to get our demon back and it’s about time you knew what you almost went up against.’

CHAPTER 12: HEART OF STONE

TAIPEI 101, FORTIETH FLOOR, KIMSICHI OG GALLERY



ARTEMIS strode through the Kimsichiog Gallery lobby, flanked by Butler and Minerva.

‘We’re in an art gallery,’ said Minerva. ‘Do we really have time for art?’

Artemis halted, surprised. ‘There’s always time for art,’ he said. ‘But we’re here for a very special piece of art.’

‘Which is?’

Artemis pointed at painted silk banners hanging at regular intervals from the ceiling. Each banner was emblazoned with a single dramatic spiralling rune.

‘I follow what is happening in the art world. This exhibition is of particular interest to me. The centrepiece is the remains of a fantastic sculpture. A semicircle of strange dancing creatures. Maybe ten thousand years old. Believed to have been found off the shore of Ireland, and yet here it is, in Taiwan, being exhibited by an American oil company.’

‘Artemis, why are we here? I need to get home to my father.’

‘Don’t you recognize the rune? Haven’t you seen it somewhere?’

Minerva remembered immediately. ‘*Mais oui! Certainement.* It is the rune from the demon’s forehead. The very same.’

Artemis snapped his fingers and continued walking.

‘Exactly. When I met Number One, I knew his markings were familiar. It took me a while to remember where I had seen them before, but once I knew, then it occurred to me that maybe this sculpture was not a sculpture at all.’

Minerva’s brain raced ahead. ‘It was the ring of warlocks. From the original time spell.’

‘Precisely. What if they were not blasted into space. What if one of them had the quick

thinking to use the gargoyle's touch, to turn them all to stone.'

'And if Number One is a warlock, then he is the only one who can reanimate them.'

'Very good, Minerva. You catch on quickly. Young, quick and arrogant. You remind me of someone. Who could that be?'

'Beats me,' said Butler, rolling his eyes.

'But how did you set this up?' the French girl wondered. 'The meeting site was Kong's idea. I heard him on the phone.'

Artemis smiled at his own cleverness. 'While he was thinking about it, I said, "I'll be wearing a burgundy **tie**. Pay attention to that. There are **a hundred and one** ways this could go wrong. If it does, the police could **tie one** of us up for a long time." Do you see?'

Minerva plucked at a curl thoughtfully. '*Mon Dieu!* You used the power of suggestion. Tie pay. A hundred and one. Tie one.'

'Or what Kong's subconscious heard: "Taipei 101. Taiwan."'

'Brilliant, Artemis. Extraordinary. And coming from me, that means something.'

'It was brilliant,' said Artemis, with characteristic lack of modesty. 'Allied to the fact that Kong's second home is Taiwan, I was reasonably confident that it would work.'

There was a harried-looking man at the gallery's reception desk. He was dressed in a neon blue suit, and his head was completely shaven, except for a spiral of stubble in the shape of N^o1's rune. He spoke in rapid Taiwanese into a Bluetooth headset clipped to his ear.

'No, no. Salmon is not good enough. Squid and lobster are what we ordered. You have them here by eight o'clock, or I will come down there, slice you up and serve you as sushi instead.'

'Trouble with the caterers?' said Artemis pleasantly in Taiwanese, when the man had disconnected.

'Yes,' replied the man. 'The exhibition is opening tonight and...'

The man stopped because he had looked up to see who he was talking to and spotted Butler.

‘Well, wow. Big. I mean hello. I am Mister Lin, the curator here. Can I help you?’

‘We were hoping for a private preview of the exhibition,’ said Artemis. ‘Specifically, the dancing figures.’

Mister Lin was so surprised he could do little more than bluster. ‘What? A what? Private? No, no, no. Impossible, out of the question. This is important art. Look at my head. Look! I don’t just do this for any old exhibition.’

‘I realize that, but my friend here, the large one, would be extremely happy if you could let us in for a minute.’

Mister Lin opened his mouth to answer, but something down the hall caught his attention.

‘What is that? Is that a muumuu?’

Artemis didn’t bother to look.

‘Oh, yes. We have disguised our fairy friend as a child in a muumuu.’

Mister Lin frowned, and the spiral on his head moved. ‘Fairy friend? Oh, really? Who are you people? Are you from *Pop Art Today*? Is this one of Dougie Hemler’s postmodernist stunts?’

‘No. He’s a real fairy. A demon warlock to be precise. The one behind him, flying, is an elf.’

‘Flying? You tell Dougie Hemler from me that there isn’t a chance in...’ Then he spotted Holly hovering over N^o1’s head. ‘Oh!’

‘Oh!’ agreed Artemis. ‘That’s a fair reaction. Now, can we go in? It’s extremely important.’

‘Are you going to ruin the exhibition?’

‘Probably,’ Artemis admitted.

Mister Lin’s lip quivered as he spoke. ‘Then I can’t let you in.’

Holly darted forward, collapsing her helmet visor.

‘I think you can let us in,’ she said, her voice layered with magic. ‘Because these three humans are your oldest friends. You invited them for a sneak preview.’

‘And what about you two?’

‘Don’t worry about us. We’re not even here. We’re just inspiration for your next exhibition. So why don’t you buzz us all in.’

Mister Lin flapped a hand at Holly. ‘Why would I worry about you? You’re not even here. Just some silly idea flying round my head. As for you three guys, I am so glad you could make it.’

‘You don’t need to video us,’ prompted Holly. ‘Why don’t you shut down the gallery cameras?’

‘I’ll just switch off the gallery cameras – give you guys a little privacy.’

‘Good idea.’

The curator had turned his attention to the pile of posters on his desk before the security door closed behind Artemis and his group.

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The exhibition hall was ultra-modern, with dark wooden floors and slatted blinds. The walls were hung with photographs – giant blow-ups of the dancing figures in the centre of the room. The figures themselves were raised on a dais, to make their detail easier to view. There were so many spotlights on them that there was barely a shadow on the stone.

N^o1 absently pulled off his bonnet, approaching the exhibit in a daze, as though he had been mesmerized and not the curator.

He climbed on to the dais, stroking the stone skin of the first figure.

‘Warlocks,’ he whispered. ‘Brothers.’

The sculpture was beautiful in its detail, and yet horrific in its subject matter. It consisted of four creatures, ranged in a broken semicircle, in the act of dancing or recoiling from something. They were small squat fairies, like N^o1, with thrusting jaws, barrel chests and stumpy tails. Their bodies, limbs and foreheads were covered with swirling runes. The demons were all holding hands, and the fourth held on to the severed hand of the next in line.

‘The circle was broken,’ said N^o1. ‘Something went wrong.’

Artemis climbed on to the dais beside him. ‘Can you bring them back?’

‘Bring them back?’ said N^o1, startled.

‘From what I know of the gargoyle’s touch, it can transform living things to stone and back again. You have the touch – can you use it?’

N^o1 rubbed his palms nervously. ‘I may have the touch. You know, *maybe*, and that’s a big maybe. I turned a wooden skewer to stone, at least I think it was stone. Maybe it was just coated with ash. I was under a lot of pressure. Everybody was watching. You know how it is; maybe you don’t. How many of you have even been in imp school? None, right?’

Artemis gripped his shoulder. ‘You’re babbling, Number One. You need to concentrate.’

‘Yes. Of course. Concentrate. Focus. Think.’

‘Good. Now, see if you can bring them back. It’s the only way to save Hybras.’

Holly shook her head. ‘Way to keep the pressure off, genius.’

Minerva was circling the exhibit in a daze not unlike her former captive’s.

‘These statues *are* actual demons. They have been among us all this time. I should have seen it, but Abbot looked nothing like this.’

Holly landed beside the girl, up close.

‘There are entire species that you know nothing about. You almost helped to wipe out one of them. You were lucky; if that *had* happened, a dozen Artemis Fowls would not have been enough to rescue you from the fairy police.’

‘I see. I said sorry already. Can we move on?’

Holly frowned at her. ‘Glad to see you’ve forgiven yourself so quickly.’

‘Harbouring feelings of guilt can have a negative effect on mental health.’

‘Child geniuses,’ growled Holly.

‘Genii,’ said Minerva.

On the dais, N^o1 was laying hands on one of the petrified demons.

‘So, back in Hybras. I just kind of held the skewer and got excited, then it started. I wasn’t trying to turn it into stone.’

‘Could you get excited now?’ asked Artemis.

‘What? Just like that? I don’t know. I feel a bit sick, to be honest. I think the muumuu is giving me a headache. It really is bright.’

‘Maybe if Butler gave you a fright?’

‘It’s not the same thing. I need some real pressure. I know Mister Butler wouldn’t actually kill me.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure.’

‘Oh, ha ha. You’re a rum one, Artemis Fowl. I can see I’m going to have to stay on my toes around you.’

Butler was checking his pistol when he heard noises in the corridor. He ran to the security door and peered out through the small rectangle of toughened glass.

‘We’ve got company,’ he declared, cocking his pistol. ‘Kong found us.’

The bodyguard put a single round into the electronic lock, frying the chip and sealing the door.

‘It’s not going to take them long to open that door. We need to wake up those demons and get out of here. Now!’

Artemis squeezed N°1’s shoulder, nodding at the security door.

‘That enough pressure for you?’

On the other side of the security door Kong and his men were halted by the sight of a smoking keypad.

‘Dammit,’ swore Kong. ‘He busted the lock. We’re going to have to shoot our way in. There’s no time for planning. Don, you have the case?’

Don held up the suitcase. ‘Right here.’

‘Good. If by some miracle there is a demon in there, clip the case on to its little wrist, good and tight. I don’t want to miss another chance.’

‘Will do. We have grenades, boss. We could blow the door.’

‘No,’ snapped Kong. ‘I need Minerva and I don’t want her injured. Anyone hurts her, I

hurt them. Understood?’

Everybody understood. Nothing complicated about it.

Inside the gallery, Artemis was getting a little anxious. He had hoped that Kong would leave the building immediately, but the hit man must have spotted one of the exhibition posters in the elevator and come to the same conclusion that Artemis himself had.

‘Anything?’ he asked N^o1, who was vaguely rubbing a statue’s arm.

‘Not yet. I’m trying.’

Artemis patted his shoulder. ‘Try a little harder. I have no desire to get involved in a firefight in a high-rise building. At the very least we would all end up in a Taiwanese prison.’

OK, thought N^o1. Concentrate. Reach into the stone.

He held the stone warlock’s finger tightly and tried to feel something. From the little he knew about warlocks, he guessed that this was probably Qwan, the elder magician. The stone figure’s head was circled by a simple band with a spiral motif at the front – the sign of leadership.

How terrible it must have been, N^o1 reflected. To see your home dematerialize and be left behind. To know it was all your own fault.

It was not my fault! snapped a voice in N^o1’s head. *It was that stupid demon N’zall. Now are you going to get me out of here or not?*

N^o1 almost fainted. His breath came in short explosive gasps and his heart seemed to hike upwards in his chest.

Come on, young warlock. Release me! I have been waiting for a long, long time.

The voice, the presence, was inside the sculpture. It was Qwan.

Of course it’s Qwan. You’re holding my hand. Who did you think it was? You’re not a simpleton, are you? Just my luck. Wait ten thousand years and then a simpleton turns up.

‘I am not a simpleton!’ blurted N^o1.

‘Of course not,’ said Artemis encouragingly. ‘Just do your best. I will instruct Butler to hold

Kong back for as long as he can.'

N^o1 bit his lip and nodded. If he spoke aloud, it could get confusing. And this situation was confusing enough without him adding to it.

He would try thought-power. Qwan was speaking in his mind; maybe it would work the other way.

Of course it works! Qwan sent. *And what is all that nonsense about cooked food? Just release me from this prison.*

N^o1 winced, trying mentally to black out his dreams of a cooked banquet.

I don't know how to set you free, he thought. *I don't know if I can.*

Of course you can, responded Qwan. *You have enough magic in you to teach a troll to play an instrument. Just let it out.*

How? I have no idea how.

Qwan was silent for a moment, while he took a quick peek into N^o1's memories.

Oh, I see. You are a complete novice. No training of any kind. Just as well really. Without expert tuition you could have blown up half of Hybras. Very well, I will give you a little nudge in the right direction. I can't do much from here, but maybe I can get your power flowing. It will get easier after this. Once you have been in contact with a warlock, some of his knowledge is passed on to you.

N^o1 could have sworn that the stone fingers round his own tightened a fraction, but that could just have been his imagination. What was definitely not in his imagination was the sudden feeling of cold loss that sped along his arm. As though life itself were being sucked from him.

Don't worry, young warlock. I'm simply siphoning off a little magic to get the sparks running. It feels terrible, but that will not last.

It did feel terrible. N^o1 imagined that dying piece by piece would feel something like this, which in a way was what was happening. And in such a situation the body will try to defend itself by seeing off the intruder. The magic that had lain dormant inside N^o1 until recently suddenly exploded in his brain and gave chase to the invader.

To N°1 it felt as though he suddenly had an entire new spectrum of vision. He had been blind before, but now he could see through walls. Of course, it was not really some kind of super-vision, it was an understanding of his own abilities. The magic flowed through him like liquid fire, chasing impurities out through his pores. Venting steam through his orifices and setting the runes on his body aglow.

Good lad, sent Qwan. Now let it go. Chase me out.

N°1 found that he was able to do exactly that – to control the magical flow. He sent it after Qwan’s tendril, through his own fingers and into Qwan’s. The dead feeling was replaced by a buzzing of power. He began to vibrate, and so did the statue, shedding wafers of stone like a dead snakeskin. The old warlock’s fingers were solid no more, but living, breathing skin. They held on to N°1 tightly, keeping the connection solid.

That’s it, lad. You’re doing it.

I am doing it, thought N°1 incredulously. This is really happening.

Artemis and Holly looked on in amazement as the magic spread through Qwan’s body, sloughing the stone from his limbs with pistol-shot cracks and orange flame. Life claimed Qwan’s hand, then his arm, then his torso. Stone fell from his chin and mouth, allowing the warlock to heave his first breath in ten millennia. Bright blue eyes squinted against the light and shut tightly. And still the magic ran on, blasting every last shard of stone from Qwan’s body, but there it stopped. When the sparks of N°1’s power reached the next warlock in line, they simply fizzled and died.

‘What about the others?’ asked N°1. Surely he could free them too.

Qwan hacked and coughed for several moments before he answered.

‘Dead,’ he said, then collapsed in the rubble.

On the other side of the gallery security door, Kong was emptying a third clip from his machine pistol into the keypad.

‘The door won’t hold much longer,’ said Butler. ‘Any second now.’

‘Can you slow them down?’ asked Artemis.

‘Shouldn’t be a problem. I don’t want to leave any bodies here, Artemis. I imagine the

police are already on their way.’

‘Maybe you could just scare them a bit.’

Butler grinned. ‘My pleasure.’

The shooting stopped and the security door drooped slightly on its hinges. Butler ripped the door open smartly, yanking Billy Kong inside, then jammed the door closed again.

‘Hello, Billy,’ he said, pinning the smaller man to the wall.

Kong was too demented to be scared. He lashed out with a series of blows, any one of which would have been fatal to a normal person. They bounced off Butler like a fly bouncing off a Tiger Tank. That’s not to say they didn’t hurt. Kong’s trained hands felt like heated brands where they impacted. Butler’s only reaction to the pain was a slight tightening round the corners of his mouth.

‘Holly?’ he said.

‘Pull,’ said Holly, aiming her Neutrino at a point in space.

Butler catapulted Billy Kong straight up, and Holly plucked him out of the air with a blast from her weapon. Kong spun across the floor, still throwing spasmodic punches.

‘The snake’s head is out of action,’ said Artemis. ‘Let’s hope the rest will follow suit.’

Minerva decided to take advantage of Billy Kong’s unconsciousness to indulge in some payback. She stalked over to her prone kidnapper.

‘You, Mister Kong, are nothing but a thug,’ she said, kicking him in the leg.

‘Young lady,’ said Butler sharply, ‘move away. He may not be completely out.’

‘If my father has as much as a hair out of place,’ continued Minerva, oblivious to Butler’s warnings, ‘I will personally ensure that you spend the maximum time in prison.’

Kong cracked open a weeping eye. ‘That’s no way to talk to your staff,’ he croaked, and wrapped steely fingers round her ankle.

Minerva realized that she had made a drastic mistake and decided that the best course of action was to scream as shrilly as possible. Which she did.

Butler was torn. His duty was to protect Artemis, not Minerva, but through years of working with Artemis and indeed Holly, he had unconsciously adopted the role of general

protector. Whenever somebody was in danger, he helped them to get out of it. And this foolish girl was certainly in danger. Mortal danger.

Why is it, he wondered, that the smart ones always think that they're invincible?

And so Butler made a decision, the consequences of which would haunt his dreams and waking hours for years to come. As a professional bodyguard, he knew the futility of second-guessing his own actions, but in the nights ahead he would often sit by the fire with his head in his hands and replay the moment in his mind, wishing that he had acted differently. Whatever way he played it out, the results were tragic, but at least they would not have been tragic for Artemis.

So Butler acted. He took four smart steps away from the door to disentangle Minerva from Kong's grasp. It was a simple thing, the man was barely semi-conscious. He seemed to be operating on some kind of psychotic energy. Butler simply stepped down hard on his wrist, then rapped him sharply between the eyes with the knuckle of his index finger. Kong's eyes rolled back in his head, and his fingers relaxed like the legs of a dying spider.

Minerva stepped smartly out of Kong's range.

'That was very foolish. I apologize,' she mumbled.

'It's a little late for that,' reprimanded Butler. 'Now will you please take cover?'

The entire mini-episode took about four seconds, but in that four seconds a lot happened on the other side of the security door. Don, who was holding the bomb, and who had recently been punched for no good reason by his boss, decided to win Kong's favour by bursting into the gallery and taking on the giant in there. He put his shoulder to the door at the exact moment that Butler stepped away at the other side, and to his own surprise, went tumbling head first into the room, followed quickly by four more of Kong's henchmen, brandishing an assortment of weapons.

Holly, who was covering the door with her Neutrino, was not unduly worried. She *began* to worry when a grenade rolled out of the tangle of men and tapped against her foot. It would be easy enough for her to escape the explosion, but Artemis and N^o1 would be well within the blast radius.

Think fast!

There was a solution, but it was costly in terms of equipment. She holstered her weapon, whipped off her helmet and jammed it down over the grenade, holding it there with her own weight. This was a trick she had employed before with mixed results. She had hoped it wouldn't become a habit.

She squatted there like a frog on a toadstool for what seemed like a long time, but couldn't have been more than a few seconds. She noticed, from the corner of her eye, that a thug with a silver case was slapping the man who had rolled the grenade. Perhaps using lethal force had been against orders.

The grenade exploded, blasting Holly into a sharp arc. The helmet absorbed most of the shock, and all of the shrapnel, but there was still enough force to shatter both of Holly's shinbones and fracture one femur. She landed on Artemis's back like a sack of rocks.

'Ow,' she said and passed out.

Artemis and N^o1 were attempting to revive Qwan.

'He's alive,' said Artemis, checking the warlock's pulse.

'Steady heartbeat. He should come out of it soon. You keep a strong contact with him or he could disappear.'

N^o1 cradled the old demon's head. 'He called me a warlock,' he said tearfully. 'I am not alone.'

'Time enough for a talk-show moment later,' said Artemis brusquely. 'We need to get you out of here.'

Kong's men were in the gallery now and shots were being fired. Artemis was confident that Butler and Holly could take care of a few thugs, but this confidence took a blow when there was a sudden explosion and a battered Holly landed on his back. Her body was instantly enveloped in a cocoon of blue light. Sparks dropped from the cocoon, like falling stars, pinpointing the most severe injuries.

Artemis crawled out from beneath her, laying his recuperating friend gently on the floor beside Qwan.

Kong's men were now embroiled with Butler, and probably regretting choosing this line of work. He tore into them like a bowling ball into a pack of quivering pins.

One made it past Butler. A tall man with a tattooed neck and an aluminium case. Artemis guessed that this case probably did not contain a selection of Asian spices, and realized that he would have to take action himself. While he was wondering exactly what it was he could do, the man sent him sprawling. By the time he made it back to Holly's side, his friend was sitting up groggily and there was a suitcase handcuffed to her wrist.

The man who had delivered the case had returned to the fray, where he had lasted less than a second before Butler took him out of it again.

Artemis knelt by Holly's side.

'Are you all right?'

Holly smiled, but it was an effort. 'Just about, thanks to the magic. I'm out though, not a drop left. So I would advise everyone to stay healthy until I can complete my ritual.' She shook her wrist, jangling the chain. 'What's in the case?'

Artemis seemed paler than usual. 'I would guess nothing pleasant.' He flicked the clips and lifted the lid. 'And I would be right. It's a bomb. Big and complicated. They sneaked it past security somehow. Through an area still under construction, I would guess.'

Holly blinked herself alert, shaking her head until the pain woke her up.

'OK. Bomb. Can you see a timer?'

'Eight minutes. And counting.'

'Can you disarm it?'

Artemis pursed his lips. 'Perhaps. I need to open the casing and get into the works before I know for sure. It could be a straight detonator or we could have all kinds of decoys.'

Qwan struggled to his elbows, coughing up large globs of dust and spit. 'What? I'm flesh and bone after ten thousand years and now you're telling me a bomb is going to blow me to a million pieces?'

'This is Qwan,' explained N^o1. 'He's the most powerful warlock in the magic circle.'

'I'm the only one now,' said Qwan. 'I couldn't save the rest. Just us two left now, lad.'

'Can you petrify the bomb?' asked Holly.

'It will take several minutes before my magic is up and running. Anyway, the gargoyle's

touch only works on organic matter. Plants and animals. A bomb is full of man-made compounds.'

Artemis raised an eyebrow. 'You know about bombs?'

'I was petrified. Not dead. I could see what was happening around me. The stories I could tell you. You wouldn't believe where tourists stick gum.'

Butler was piling unconscious bodies against the security doors.

'We have to get out of here!' he called. 'The police are in the hallway.'

Artemis stood and took half a dozen steps away from the group, closing his eyes.

'Artemis, this is no time to fall apart,' chided Minerva, crawling from behind a display case. 'We need a plan.'

'Shh, young lady,' said Butler. 'He's thinking.'

Artemis gave himself twenty seconds to rack his brains. What he came up with was very far from perfect.

'Very well. Holly, you must fly us out of here.'

Holly did a few sums in her head. 'It will take two trips, maybe three.'

'No time for that. The bomb must go first. There are a lot of people in this building. I must go with the bomb as there is a chance I can defuse it. And the fairies must come too; it is imperative that they are not taken into custody. Hybras would be lost.'

'I can't allow this,' objected Butler. 'I have a duty to your parents.'

Artemis was stern with his protector.

'I am giving you a new duty,' he said. 'Look after Minerva. Keep her safe until we can rendezvous.'

'Let Holly fly out over the sea and drop the bomb,' argued Butler. 'We can mount a rescue later.'

'It will be too late. If we don't get these fairies out of here, the eyes of the world will be on Taipei. And anyway, the local seas are thronged with fishing boats. This is the only way. I will not allow humans or fairies to die when I might have prevented it.'

Butler would not give up. 'Listen to yourself. You sound like a... like a *good guy!* There's nothing in this for you.'

Artemis had no time for emotions. 'In the words of H. P. Woodman, old friend, *Time is ticking on, and so we must be gone.* Holly, tie us to your belt, all except Butler and Minerva.'

Holly nodded, still slightly shell-shocked. She reeled out a number of pitons from her belt, wishing she had been issued one of Foaly's Moonbelts, which generated a lo-grav field around everything attached to it.

'Under the arms,' she instructed N^o1. 'Then clip it back on to the loop.'

Butler helped Artemis with his strap. 'This is it, Artemis. I've had it, I swear. When we get home I am retiring. I'm older than I look, and I feel older than I am. No more plotting. Promise me?'

Artemis forced a smile. 'I am simply flying to the next building. If I cannot defuse the bomb, then Holly can fly it out to sea and endeavour to find a safe spot.'

They both knew that Artemis was lying. If he could not defuse the bomb, there would be no time to find a safe drop point.

'Here,' said Butler, handing him a flat leather wallet. 'My picks. So you can at least get into the works.'

'Thank you, old friend.'

Holly was loaded to the chin. N^o1 and Qwan clung to her waist, while Artemis was cinched to the front.

'OK. Everyone ready?'

'I wish my magic would come back,' grumbled Qwan. 'I'd turn myself into a statue again.'

'Terrified,' said N^o1. 'Freaking. Planking. Up the creek.'

'Colloquialisms,' said Artemis. 'Very good.'

Butler closed the case. 'One building across. That's as far as you need to go. Get that panel off and go straight for the explosive itself. Rip out the detonator if you have to.'

'Understood.'

'OK. I won't say goodbye, just good luck. I will see you as soon as I can talk us out of

here.'

'Thirty minutes, if that.'

Up to that point Minerva had hung back looking shamefaced. Now she came forward.

'I'm sorry, Artemis. I shouldn't have gone near Mister Kong.'

Butler lifted her bodily aside. 'No, you shouldn't, but there's no time for apologies now. Just stand by the door and look innocent.'

'But I...'

'Innocent! Now!'

Minerva obliged, wisely realizing that this was not the time for arguing.

'OK, Holly,' said Artemis. 'Lift off.'

'Check,' said Holly, activating her backpack. The wings struggled with the extra weight for a moment, and there was something about the engine vibration that Holly didn't like, but gradually her rig took the strain and lifted all four of them off the floor.

'OK,' she said. 'I think we're good.'

Butler nudged the flying group towards a window. This was all so risky he couldn't believe that he was letting it happen. But there was no time to deliberate. It was do or die.

He reached up, yanking down on the window's security catch. The entire two-metre pane swung wide, allowing the high altitude wind to scream into the building. Suddenly, everyone was deafened and under attack from the elements. It was hard to see anyone and even harder to hear them.

Holly floated the group outside and they would have been whipped away had Butler not held on for a second.

'Go with the wind,' he shouted to Holly, releasing his grip. 'Make your descent gradual.'

Holly nodded. Her wing motor skipped a beat and they dropped two metres.

Artemis's stomach lurched.

'Butler,' he called, his voice thin and childlike in the wind.

'Yes, Artemis, what?'

‘If something goes wrong, wait for me. No matter how it looks, I will return. I will bring them all back.’

Butler nearly jumped out after them. ‘What are you planning, Artemis? What are you going to do?’

Artemis called back, but the wind caught his words, and his bodyguard could only stand framed by steel and glass, shouting into the wind.

They dropped quickly. A bit more quickly than Holly would have liked.

The wings can't take it, she realized. Not the weight and the wind. We're not going to make it.

She rapped a knuckle on Artemis's head. ‘Artemis!’ she shouted.

‘I know,’ shouted the Irish boy. ‘Too much weight.’

If they fell now, the bomb would detonate in the middle of Taipei. That was unacceptable. There was only one thing to do. Artemis had not even mentioned this option to Butler, as he knew the bodyguard would reject it no matter how sound his own reasoning.

Before Artemis had time to act on his theory, Holly's wings spluttered, jerked and died. They fell in ragged free fall like a sack of anchors, head over heels, dangerously close to the skyscraper wall.

Artemis's eyes were scalded by wind, his limbs were folded back to breaking point by rushing air, and his cheeks were ballooned to comical proportions, though there was nothing funny about falling hundreds of metres to a certain death.

No! said Artemis's iron core. *I will not let this be the end.*

With a grim and physical determination that he must have picked up from Butler, Artemis raised his arms and grabbed N^o1's arm. The object he sought was right there, almost in his face, and yet it seemed impossible to reach.

Impossible or not, I must reach it.

It was like trying to push against the skin of a giant balloon, but push Artemis did.

The ground rushed up from below, smaller skyscrapers jutting up like spears. And still Artemis pushed.

Finally, his fingers closed round N°1's silver bracelet.

Goodbye, world, he thought. One way or another.

And he ripped the bracelet off, flinging it into the air. Now, the demonkind were no longer anchored to this dimension. For a second there was no obvious reaction to this, but then, just as they were passing between the first of the lower skyscrapers, a revolving purple trapezoid opened in the sky and swallowed them as neatly as a kid catching a Cheerio in his mouth.

Butler staggered back from the window, trying to process what he had seen. Holly's wings had failed, that much was clear, but then what? What?

It dawned on him suddenly. Artemis must have had a secondary plan; that boy always did. Artemis wouldn't go to the bathroom without a back-up. So they weren't dead. There was a good chance of that. They had just disappeared into the demon dimension. He would have to keep telling himself that until he believed it.

Butler noticed that Minerva was crying.

'They're all dead, aren't they? Because of me.'

Butler placed a hand on her shoulder. 'If they were all dead, it would be because of you, but they're not – Artemis has everything under control. Now, chin up, we have to talk our way out of here, daughter.'

Minerva frowned. 'Daughter?'

Butler winked, though he felt anything but cheery. 'Yes, daughter.'

Seconds later a squad of Taiwanese regular police heaved open the door, flooding the room with blue and grey uniforms. Butler found himself looking down the barrels of a dozen police special pistols. Most of these barrels were wobbling slightly.

'No, you dolts,' squealed Mr Lin, threading his way through the policemen, slapping at their gun arms. 'Not that one. He is my good friend. Those other ones, the unconscious

ones. They are the ones who broke in here; they knocked me down. It is a miracle my friend and his...'

'Daughter,' prompted Butler.

'And his daughter were not harmed.'

Then the curator noticed his demolished exhibit and faked a faint. When no one rushed to aid him, he picked himself up, went off into a corner and had a little cry.

An inspector, who wore his gun cowboy-style, ambled across to Butler.

'You did this?'

'No. Not me. We were hiding behind a crate. They blew up the sculpture then started fighting among themselves.'

'Do you have any idea why these people would want to destroy a sculpture?'

Butler shrugged. 'I think they think they're anarchists. Who knows with these people.'

'They have no ID,' said the inspector. 'Not one of them. I find that a bit strange.'

Butler smiled bitterly. After all Billy Kong had done, he would only be prosecuted for property damage. Of course, they could mention the kidnapping, but that would lead to weeks, possibly months of red tape in Taiwan. And Butler did not particularly want anyone looking too deeply into his past, or indeed the selection of false passports in his jacket pocket.

Then something struck him. Something about Kong from a conversation back in Nice.

Kong used a kitchen knife on his friend, Foaly had said. There's still a warrant out for him there, under the name Jonah Lee.

Kong was wanted for murder in Taiwan, Butler realized, and there was no statute of limitations on murder.

'I heard them talking to that one,' said Butler, pointing to the supine Billy Kong. 'They called him Mister Lee, or Jonah. He was the boss.'

The inspector was interested. 'Oh, really. Did you hear anything else? Sometimes the smallest detail can be important.'

Butler frowned, thinking about it. 'One of them said something, I don't even know what

it means...’

‘Go on,’ urged the inspector.

‘He said... let me think. He said, *You’re not such a tough guy, Jonah. You haven’t notched your barrel in years.* What does that mean, *notching your barrel?*’

The inspector pulled a mobile phone from his pocket. ‘It means that man is a murder suspect.’ He hit ‘one’ then speed dial. ‘Base? Chan here. I need you to run the name Jonah Lee through records — go back a few years.’ He closed the phone. ‘Thanks, Mister... ?’

‘Arnott,’ said Butler. ‘Franklin Arnott, New York City.’

He had been using the Arnott passport for several years. It was genuinely rumpled.

‘Thanks, Mister Arnott, you may just have caught a murderer.’

Butler blinked. ‘A murderer! Wow. Do you hear that, Eloise? Daddy caught a murderer.’

‘Well done, Daddy,’ said *Eloise*, looking unhappy with Daddy for some reason.

The inspector turned to pursue his inquiries, then stopped.

‘The curator said there was another person. A boy. A friend of yours?’

‘Yes. And no. He’s my son. Arty.’

‘I don’t see him around.’

‘He just stepped out, but he’ll be back.’

‘Are you sure?’

Butler’s eyes lost their focus. ‘Yes, I’m sure. He told me.’

CHAPTER 13: OUT OF TIME



THE journey between dimensions was more violent than Artemis remembered. There was no time to reflect on various scenery changes, and barely time for his senses to register sights, sounds or temperature changes. They were ripped from their own dimension and dragged through wormholes of space and time with only their consciousnesses intact. Only once did they materialize for the briefest second.

The landscape was grey, bleak and pockmarked, and in the distance Artemis could see a blue planet camouflaged by cloud cover.

I'm on the moon, thought Artemis, then they were gone again, drawn by the lure of Hybras.

It was an unnatural feeling, this out-of-body, out-of-mind travel. *How am I still aware?* thought Artemis. *How is any of this possible?*

And stranger still, when he concentrated, Artemis could feel the thoughts of the others swirling around him. It was mostly broad emotions, such as fear or excitement. But after a bit of mental twiddling, Artemis detected specific thoughts too.

There was Holly, wondering if her weapon would arrive intact. Typical soldier. And there was N°1, fretting incessantly, not about the journey itself but about someone who would be waiting for him in Hybras. Abbot. A demon named Abbot.

Artemis reached out and found Qwan floating in the ether. His mind was formidable, juggling complex computations and philosophical puzzles.

You are keeping the mind active, young human.

Artemis's consciousness realized that this thought was directed at him. The warlock had felt his clumsy probe.

Artemis could feel a difference between his mind and the others. They had something different. An alien energy. It was difficult to explain a feeling without senses, but for some

reason it seemed to be blue. A blue plasma, electric and alive. Artemis allowed this rich feeling to flow through his mind and was instantly jolted by its energy.

Magic, he realized. *Magic is in the mind*. Now this was something worth knowing. Artemis retreated to his own mind-space, but he took a sample of the blue plasma with him. You never know when a touch of magic would come in useful.

They materialized on Hybras, inside the crater itself. Their arrival was accompanied by a flash of displaced energy. The group lay on the soot-blackened slopes, panting and steaming. The ground beneath them was warm to the touch, and the acrid stink of sulphur stung their nostrils. The euphoria of materialization soon dissipated.

Artemis breathed experimentally, the air from his mouth blowing up small dust eddies. Volcanic gas made his eyes water, and flat flakes of ash instantly coated every exposed patch of skin.

‘This could be hell,’ he commented.

‘Hell or Hybras,’ said N^o1, climbing to his knees. ‘I got some of this ash on a tunic before. It never comes out.’

Holly was up too, running a systems check on her equipment.

‘My Neutrino is fine. But I can’t get a lock on a communications signal. We’re on our own. And I seem to have lost the bomb.’

Artemis kneeled, his knees cracking through the ash crust, releasing the heat below. He glanced at his watch and caught sight of his own face. His hair was grey with ash, and for a second he thought he was looking at his father.

A thought struck him. *I look like my father, a father I may never see again. Mother. Butler. I have only one friend left.*

‘Holly,’ he said. ‘Let me look at you.’

Holly did not look up from her wrist computer.

‘No time right now, Artemis.’

Artemis padded across to her, walking gingerly on the thin crust.

‘Holly, let me look at you,’ he said again, holding her shoulders.

Something in Artemis’s voice made Holly stop what she was doing and pay attention.

This was not a tone Artemis Fowl used very often. It could almost class as tenderness.

‘I just need to make sure you’re still you. Things get mixed up between dimensions. On my last trip, I switched fingers.’

He held up his hand for her to see. ‘Strange, I know. But you seem to be fine. All present and correct.’

Something flashed in the corner of Artemis’s eye. There was a metal case half buried in the ash further up the crater wall.

‘The bomb,’ sighed Artemis. ‘I thought we’d lost it in transit. There was a flash when we landed.’

Qwan hurried across to the bomb. ‘No. That was energy displacement. Mostly mine. Magic is almost another being. It flows where it will. Some of mine did not flow back to me in time, and ignited on re-entry. I am happy to say that the rest of my power is fired up and ready to go.’

Artemis was struck by how much of this prehistoric being’s language was similar to NASA jargon. *No wonder we don’t have a chance against the fairies*, he thought. *They were solving dimensional equations when we were still knocking stones together.*

Artemis helped the warlock to heave the bomb from the ash’s grip. The timer had been knocked for six by the time-jump and now read over five thousand hours. Finally, a stroke of luck.

Artemis used Butler’s picks to examine the bomb’s workings. Maybe he could disarm it if he had a few months, a couple of computers and some laser tools. Without those things, there was about as much chance of him disarming this weapon as there was of a squirrel making a paper aeroplane.

‘This bomb is perfectly operational,’ he said to Qwan. ‘Only the timer was affected.’

The warlock stroked his beard. ‘That makes sense. That instrument is relatively simple, compared to the complexity of our bodies. The dimension tunnel would have no trouble reassembling it. The timer is another matter. It will be affected by any time-flares we run

across here. It could blow at any second, or never.'

Not never, thought Artemis. I may not be able to disarm this thing, but I can certainly blow it, when I need to.

Holly peered at the deadly device. 'Is there any way we can dispose of it?'

Qwan shook his head. 'Inanimate objects cannot travel unaccompanied in the time tunnel. We, on the other hand, could get sucked back in at any moment. We need to get some silver on us immediately.'

Holly glanced at Artemis. 'Maybe some of us want to get sucked back in.'

'Maybe you do,' said Qwan. 'But under certain conditions. If you just let yourselves go, who knows where you'll end up. Or when. Your natural space and time will attract you, but with the spell deteriorating, you could arrive encased in rock a mile below the surface, or stranded on the moon.'

This was a sobering thought. It was one thing to have a quick tourist's look at the surface of the moon. It was quite another to be stuck there forever. Not that you would know anything about it after the first minute.

'So we're stuck here?' said Holly. 'Come on, Artemis. You have a plan. You always have a plan.'

The others gathered round Artemis. There was something about him that made people assume that he was the leader. Perhaps it was the way he assumed it himself. Also, in this instance, he was the tallest person in the group.

He smiled briefly. *So this is how Butler feels all the time.*

'We all have our reasons for wanting to go back,' he began. 'Holly and I have left loved ones behind. Friends and family we would dearly love to see again. Number One and Qwan, you need to get your People out of this dimension. The spell is unravelling, and soon nowhere on this island will be safe. If my calculations are correct, and I feel certain that they are, then not even silver can anchor you here for much longer. Now, you can go when the spell dictates, or *we* can decide when to make the jump.'

Qwan did his sums in his head. 'Not possible. It took seven warlocks and a volcano to move the island here. To get us back I would need seven magical beings. Warlocks

preferably. And of course, a live volcano, which we don't have.'

'Does it have to be a volcano? Wouldn't any energy source do?'

'Theoretically,' agreed Qwan. 'So, you're saying we could use the bomb?'

'It's possible.'

'Highly unlikely, but possible. I still need seven magical beings.'

'But the spell is already cast,' argued Artemis. 'The infrastructure is there. Couldn't you do it with fewer?'

Qwan wagged a finger at Artemis. 'You are a smart Mud Boy. Yes, maybe I could do it with fewer. Of course, we would not know until we arrived.'

'How many?'

'Five. Five at the absolute least.'

Holly ground her teeth. 'We only have three, and Number One's a novice. So we need to find two demons with magic on this island.'

'Impossible,' snapped Qwan. 'Once an imp warps, that's the end of any magic they might have. Only warlocks, like myself and Number One, do not warp. So we keep our magic.'

Artemis brushed ash from his jacket.

'Our first priority is to get out of this crater and find some silver. I suggest we leave the bomb here. The temperature is not enough to ignite it, and if it does explode, the volcano will absorb some of the force. If we are going to find some other magical creature, we will undoubtedly have a better chance outside this crater. At any rate, the sulphur is giving me a headache.'

Artemis did not wait for agreement. He turned and made for the crater lip. After a moment, the others followed, struggling with each footfall through the crust of ash. It reminded Artemis of a giant sand dune he'd trudged up with his father once. Here, falling would have harsher consequences.

It was a difficult and treacherous hike. The ash concealed grooves in the rock and small crevasses that vented warm air from the volcano. Colourful fungi grew in clusters around these vents, and they glowed in the crater shadows like coral night lights.

Nobody spoke much during the climb. N°1 muttered his way through large tracts of the dictionary, but the others realized that this was his way of keeping his chin up.

Artemis glanced upwards occasionally. The sky was dawn red and glowed above him like a lake of blood.

That's a cheery metaphor, thought Artemis. Maybe it says something about my character that a lake of blood is the only image I can come up with.

N°1's build was best suited for the steep climb. He had a low centre of gravity, and could rest on his stumpy tail if need be. His thick feet anchored him securely and armoured plates covering his body protected him from sparks or bruising in the event of a fall.

Qwan was clearly suffering. The old warlock had been a statue for the past ten thousand years and was still working the kinks out of his bones. Magic soothed the process somewhat, but even magic could not completely erase the pain. He winced each time his foot punctured the soot crust.

Finally, the group reached the summit. If time had passed it was impossible to tell how much. The sky still had the same red tinge, and all timepieces had virtually stopped.

Holly jogged the last few steps, then raised her right hand, fingers closed in a fist.

'That means halt,' Artemis told the others. 'It's a military thing. Human soldiers use the exact same sign.'

Holly poked her head above the rim for a moment, then returned to the group.

'What does it mean if there are a lot of demons on their way up the mountain?'

Qwan smiled. 'It means our brother demons saw the flash of our arrival and are coming to greet us.'

'And what does it mean if they are all armed with crossbows?'

'Hmm,' mused Qwan. 'That could be a touch more serious.'

'How bad can they be?' asked Artemis. 'We've faced trolls together.'

'It's fine,' said Holly, powering up her handgun. 'They're not so big. We're going to be fine. Really.'

Artemis frowned. Holly only bothered reassuring him when they were in deep trouble.

‘That bad?’ he said.

Holly whistled, shaking her head. ‘You have no idea.’

CHAPTER 14: LEADER OF THE PACK

THE ISLAND OF HYBRAS



WHILE Artemis and company had been zooming around the time tunnel, Leon Abbot had been in Council with the pride elders. Council was where all the big decisions were made, or more accurately, where Abbot made all the big decisions. The others thought they were participating, but Leon Abbot had a way of bringing them round to his way of thinking.

If only they knew, he thought, biting the inside of his cheek to prevent a smug grin spreading across his face. They would eat me alive. But they can never know, because there is nobody left alive to tell them. That dolt Number One was the last, and he's gone. What a pity.

Abbot had something big planned for today. A big departure for the pride, the dawn of a new era. The Leon Abbot era.

He looked down the table at his fellow demons, sucking the bones from a bucket of recently live rabbits that he had laid on for the meeting. He despised the other Council members. Every one. They were weak, stupid creatures, ruled by their baser appetites. What they needed was leadership. No arguments, no debates, just *his* word was law, and that was that.

Of course, under normal circumstances, the other demons might not share his vision of the future. In fact, if he suggested it, then they would most likely do to him what they were currently doing to the rabbits. But these were not normal circumstances. He had certain *advantages* when it came to negotiating with the Council.

At the far end of the table, Hadley Shrivelington Basset, a recent addition to the Council, stood and growled loudly. The signal that he wished to speak. In truth, Basset worried Abbot slightly. He was proving a little resistant to Abbot's regular powers of persuasion, and some of the others were beginning to listen to him. Basset would have to be handled soon.

Basset growled again, cupping both hands round his mouth to ensure that the sound travelled to the head of the table.

‘I would speak, Leon Abbot. I would have you listen.’

Abbot sighed wearily, waving at the demon to go ahead.

The young ones certainly loved their formality.

‘Things are happening that worry me, Abbot. Things are not as they should be with the pride.’

There were murmurs of assent from round the table. Not to worry. The others would soon change their tune.

‘We are known by human names. We venerate a human book. I find this sickening. Are we to become human altogether?’

‘I have explained this, Basset. Perhaps a million times. Are you so dull-witted that my words do not penetrate your skull?’

Basset growled low in his throat. These were fighting words. And pride leader or not, Abbot would soon find those words rammed down his throat.

‘Let me try one more time,’ continued Abbot, plonking his boots on the table, a further insult to Basset. ‘We learn the human ways so we can better understand them, and so more easily defeat them. We read the book; we practise with the crossbow; we bear the names.’

Basset would not be cowed. ‘I have *heard* these words a million times, and each time they seem ridiculous to me. We do not give each other rabbit names when we hunt rabbit. We do not live in foxholes to hunt the fox. We can learn from the book and the bow, but we are demon, not human. My family name was Gristle. Now that’s a real demon name! Not this stupid Hadley Shrivelington Basset.’

It was a good argument and well presented. Maybe in different circumstances Abbot would have applauded and recruited the young demon as a lieutenant, but lieutenants grew up to be challengers and that was one thing Abbot did not want.

Abbot stood, walking slowly down the length of the table, gazing into the eyes of each Council member in turn. At first, their eyes blazed with defiance, but as Abbot began to speak, this fire faded to be replaced by a dull sheen of obedience.

‘You are right, of course,’ said Abbot, running a talon along one curved horn. An arc of sparks followed the path of his nail. ‘Everything you say is exactly right. The names, that ridiculous book, the crossbow. Learning the language of English. It’s all a joke.’

Basset’s lips curled back over pointed white teeth, and his tawny eyes narrowed. ‘You admit this, Abbot? You hear him admit it?’

Before, the others had grunted their approval of the young buck’s challenge, but now it was as if the fight had gone out of them. All they could do was stare at the table, as if the answers to life’s questions were etched into the wood grain.

‘The truth is, Basset,’ continued Abbot, drawing ever nearer. ‘That we’re never going back home. This is our home now.’

‘But you said...’

‘I know. I said that the spell would end, and we would be sucked back to where we came from. And who knows, it may even be true. But I have no idea what will actually happen. All I know is that for as long as we are here, I intend to be in charge.’

Basset was stunned. ‘There will be no great battle? But we’ve been training for so long.’

‘Distraction,’ said Abbot, waving his fingers like a magician. ‘Smoke and spells. It gave the troops something to concentrate on.’

‘To *what* on?’ asked Basset, puzzled.

‘Concentrate, you moron. Think about. As long as there’s a war to be planned, demons are happy. I provided the war, and I showed them how to win. So, naturally, I am a saviour.’

‘You gave us the crossbow.’

Abbot had to stop and laugh. This Basset really was a prize fool. He could almost pass for a gnome.

‘The crossbow,’ he panted at last, when his mirth had petered away. ‘The crossbow! The Mud Men have weapons that shoot death. They have iron birds that fly, dropping exploding eggs. And there are millions of them. Millions! All they would have to do is drop one egg on our little island and we would disappear. And *this* time, there would be no coming back.’

Basset did not know whether to attack or flee. All these revelations were hurting his brain, and all the other Council members could do was sit there drooling. It was almost as if they were under a spell...

‘Come on,’ said Abbot mockingly. ‘You’re getting there. Wring out that sponge of a brain.’

‘You have bewitched the Council.’

‘Full marks!’ crowed Abbot. ‘Give that demon a raw rabbit!’

‘B-but that can’t be,’ stammered Basset. ‘Demons are not magical creatures, except the warlocks. And warlocks do not warp.’

Abbot spread his arms wide. ‘And I am so obviously a magnificently warped creature. Does your brain hurt? Is this all too much for you, Basset?’

Basset pulled a long sword from its scabbard.

‘My name is Gristle!’ he roared, lunging at the pride leader.

Abbot batted the blade aside with his forearm, then pounced on his opponent. Abbot may have been a liar and a manipulator, but he was also a fearsome warrior. Basset may as well have been a dove attacking an eagle.

Abbot drove the smaller demon to the stone floor, then squatted on his chest, ignoring the blows Basset drove into his armoured plates.

‘Is that the best you can do, little one? I have had better tumbles with my dog.’

He grabbed Basset’s head between his hands and squeezed until the younger demon’s eyes bulged.

‘Now I *could* kill you,’ said Abbot, and the thought gave him obvious pleasure. ‘But you are a popular buck among the imps, and they would pester me with questions. So I will let you live. After a fashion. Your free will shall belong to me.’

Basset shouldn’t have been able to speak, but he managed to moan one word.

‘Never.’

Abbot squeezed harder.

‘Never? Never, you say? But don’t you know that *never* comes quickly here in Hybras?’

Then Abbot did what no warped demon should be able to do: he summoned magic from inside himself and let it shine through his eyes.

‘You are mine,’ he said to Basset, and his voice was layered with magic, and irresistible.

The others were so conditioned that they succumbed to just a tinge of the *mesmer* in his voice, but for Basset’s fresh young mind, Abbot was calling forth every spark of magic in his system. Magic that he had stolen. Magic that, by fairy law, was never to be used to mesmerize another fairy.

Basset’s face was turned red, and his forehead plate cracked.

‘You are mine!’ repeated Abbot, staring straight into Basset’s captive eyes. ‘You will never question me again.’

To Basset’s credit, he fought the enchantment for several seconds, until the magic’s power actually burst a blood vessel in his eye. Then, as the blood spread across the orange sclera of his eye, Basset’s resolve faded, to be replaced by docile dullness.

‘I am yours,’ he intoned. ‘I will never question you again.’

Abbot closed his eyes for a moment, drawing the magic back into himself. When he opened them again, he was all smiles.

‘That’s good. I am so glad to hear that, Basset. I mean, your option was quick and painful death, so you’re better off as a mindless lapdog anyway.’

He climbed to his feet and graciously helped Basset to his.

‘You’ve had a fall,’ he explained, in a doctor–patient voice. ‘And I’m helping you to your feet.’

Basset blinked dreamily. ‘I will never question you again.’

‘Oh, never mind all that now. Just sit down and do whatever I say.’

‘I am yours,’ said Basset.

Abbot slapped his cheek gently. ‘And the others said we wouldn’t get along.’

Abbot returned to his own chair at the head of the lodge. The chair was high-backed and made from various animal parts. He settled into it, paddling the armrests with his palms.

‘I love this chair,’ he said. ‘Actually, it’s more of a throne than a chair, which brings me

to our main business here today.’ Abbot reached under a leather flap in the chair and pulled out a roughly fashioned bronze crown.

‘I think it’s about time the Council declared me king for life,’ he said, fixing the crown on his head.

This new king-for-life idea would be a tough sell. A demon pride was always ruled over by the fittest, and it was a very temporary position. Abbot had only survived as long as he had by mesmerizing anyone who dared challenge him.

Most of the Council had been under Abbot’s spell for so long that they accepted the suggestion as if it were a royal decree, but some of the younger ones shuddered with violent spasms as their true beliefs wrestled with this new repugnant idea.

Their struggles didn’t last long. Abbot’s suggestion spread like a virus through their conscious and subconscious, subduing revolution wherever it was found.

Abbot adjusted his crown slightly. ‘Enough debate. All in favour, say *graaargh!*’

‘GRAAARGH!’ howled the demons, battering the table with gauntlets and swords.

‘All hail King Leon,’ prompted Abbot.

‘ALL HAIL KING LEON!’ mimicked the Council, like trained parrots.

The adulation was interrupted by a soldier demon, who burst through the lodge’s flap.

‘There’s a... there was a big...’

Abbot whipped off the crown. The general population wasn’t ready for that yet.

‘There’s a what?’ he demanded. ‘A big what?’

The soldier paused, catching his breath. He realized suddenly that he’d better communicate the *bigness* of what had happened on the mountain, or else Abbot was liable to behead him for interrupting the meeting.

‘There was a big flash.’ A big flash? That didn’t sound *big* enough.

‘Let me start again. A *huge* flash of light came from the volcano. Two of the hunting party were nearby. They say someone came through. A group. Four beings.’

Abbot frowned. ‘Beings?’

‘Two demons, maybe. But the other two. The hunter doesn’t know what they are.’

This was serious. Abbot knew it. These beings could be humans, or worse still, surviving warlocks. If it was a warlock, he would surely guess Abbot’s secret. All it would take was one demon with some real power, and his hold on the pride would be gone. This situation had to be contained.

‘Very well. The Council will investigate. Nobody else goes up there.’

The soldier’s Adam’s apple bobbed nervously, as if he was about to bear bad news. ‘It’s too late, Master Abbot. The entire pride is climbing the volcano.’

Abbot was halfway to the door before the soldier finished his sentence.

‘Follow me!’ he shouted to the other demons. ‘And bring your weapons.’

‘GRAAARGH!’ roared the spellbound Council members.

Artemis was surprised at how calm he felt. You would think that a teenage human would be terrified at the sight of a pride of demons climbing towards him, but Artemis was more nervous than terrified, and more curious than nervous.

He glanced backwards over his shoulder, into the crater they had just climbed out of.

‘The pride comes before a fall,’ he said softly, then smiled at his own joke.

Holly overheard. ‘You certainly pick your moment to develop a sense of humour.’

‘Usually, I would be planning, but this is out of my hands. Qwan is in charge now.’

Nº1 led them along the rim of the crater towards a low rocky ledge. There was a wooden rod jammed into the ground beside the ledge, and hooked over the rod were dozens of silver bangles. Most tarnished and soot-caked.

Nº1 wiggled a bunch over the top of the rod.

‘Dimension jumpers leave these here,’ he explained, passing them out. ‘Just in case they make it back. No one ever did, until now. Except Leon Abbot, of course.’

Qwan slipped a bangle on to his wrist. ‘Dimension jumping is suicide. Without silver, a demon will never be able to stay in one place for more than a few seconds. They will drift

between times and dimensions until they are killed by exposure or starvation. Magic is the only reason we're here. I am amazed this Abbot person made it back. What is his demon name?'

Nº1 squinted down the mountain pathway.

'You can ask him yourself. That's him, the big one elbowing his way to the head of the group.'

Holly squinted down at the pride leader.

'The one with the curved horns and big sword?' she asked.

'Is he smiling?'

'No.'

'That's Abbot.'

It was a strange reunion. There was no hugging, no champagne and no teary-eyed reminiscing. Instead, there were bared teeth, drawn swords and threatening behaviour. The latest batch of imps were especially eager to skewer the newcomers and prove their valour. Artemis was the number one target in the group. Imagine, an actual live human here on Hybras. He didn't look so tough.

Artemis and company had stayed put on the ledge, waiting for the demons to come to them. They didn't have to wait long. The imps arrived first, breathless from the climb and just dying to kill something. If it hadn't been for Qwan, Artemis would have been ripped to shreds on the spot. In fairness, Holly had something to do with keeping Artemis alive too. She tagged the first half-dozen imps with a charge from her Neutrino strong enough to send them scurrying back to what they thought was a safe distance. After that, Qwan managed to hold their attention by conjuring a multicoloured dancing monkey in the air.

Soon every demon who was able to climb the mountain had done so, and they were all staring at the magical monkey.

Even Nº1 was entranced. 'What is that?'

Qwan fluttered his fingers, causing the monkey to somersault.

‘It’s a simple magical construct. Instead of allowing the sparks to roam on instinct, I marshal them into a recognizable form. It takes time and effort, but in time you will have this micro-control too.’

‘No,’ said N°1. ‘I mean what *is* that?’

Qwan sighed. ‘It’s a monkey.’

As their numbers grew, the demons became more and more agitated. The warriors crashed horns in a show of strength. They bashed each other’s chest plates with their forearms and made a big show of sharpening their swords on stones.

‘I miss Butler,’ said Artemis.

‘Me too,’ said Holly, scanning the crowd for the greatest threat. It wasn’t easy to decide. Every demon in the crowd seemed as though he was on the verge of hurling himself at the new arrivals. Holly had seen three-dimensional models of demons, of course, but she had never seen the real thing. The models were accurate enough, but they couldn’t capture the bloodlust in the creatures’ eyes, or the eerie whines that curled out of their noses as battle fever possessed them.

Abbot barged through to the front of the group and Holly instantly trained her weapon on his chest.

‘Qwan!’ said Abbot, obviously amazed. ‘You’re alive? I thought the warlocks were all dead.’

‘Except the one that helped you,’ said N°1 before he could stop himself.

Abbot took a step back. ‘Well, yes. Except that one.’

Qwan closed his fist and the monkey disappeared. ‘I know you,’ he said slowly, searching for the memories. ‘You were at Tailhte. You were a dissenter.’

Abbot drew himself up. ‘That’s right. I am Abbot the dissenter. We never should have come here. We should have met the humans head-on. The warlocks betrayed us!’ He levelled his sword at Qwan. ‘You betrayed us!’

The other demons growled and rattled their weapons.

Abbot took a moment to study the other members of the group.

‘A human! That’s a human. You have brought the enemy to our door. How long before the rest of them follow in their metal birds?’

‘Metal birds?’ said Artemis in Gnommish. ‘What metal birds? All we have are crossbows, remember?’

There followed a collective *ooh*, as the demons realized that this human spoke their language, albeit with an accent.

Abbot decided to change the subject. This boy was picking holes in his story. ‘And you brought an elf too, warlock. Armed with a magical weapon. The elves betrayed us at Taillte!’

Qwan was getting bored with all this posturing. ‘I know, everybody betrayed you at Taillte. Why don’t you give the order you’re working up to? You want us dead. Give the order, and see if our brother demons will attack the only being who can save them.’

Abbot realized that he was on very dangerous ground. This poisonous little bunch had to be dealt with. Quickly and permanently.

‘You want to die so much? So be it, you can die.’ He pointed his sword at the small group and was on the verge of roaring ‘Kill them!’ or perhaps ‘Death to the traitors!’ when Qwan snapped his fingers. He did this in a very showy way, setting off a magical mini-explosion.

‘I remember you now. Your name isn’t Abbot. You’re N’zall, the idiot who ruined the time spell. But you seem different. Those red markings.’

Abbot flinched as if struck. A few of the older demons sniggered. Abbot’s demon name wasn’t brought up very much. Abbot was a little embarrassed by it, not surprisingly since N’zall meant ‘little horn’ in the old demon cant.

‘It is you, N’zall. It’s all coming back to me now. You and that other moron, Bludwin – you were against the time spell. You wanted to fight it out with the humans.’

‘I still do,’ roared Abbot, overcompensating after the mention of his true name. ‘There’s one right here. We can start with him.’

Qwan was angry now, for the first time since he came back to life. ‘We had it all worked out. We had a circle of seven in the volcano, the lava was rising, and everything was under control, then you and Bludwin hopped out from behind a rock and broke the circle.’

Abbot's laugh was hollow. 'This never happened. You have been away too long, warlock. You have gone mad.'

Qwan's eyes burned with blue sparks, and magic rippled along the length of his arms. 'I have been a statue for ten thousand years because of you.'

'Nobody believes a word of this, warlock.'

'I believe it,' said N°1. And there were some in the demon camp who believed it too. It was in their eyes.

'You tried to murder the warlocks!' continued Qwan accusingly. 'There was some commotion and Bludwin went into the volcano. His energy tainted the spell. Then you dragged my apprentice, Qweffor, into the lava too. Both of you went in. I saw it.' Qwan frowned, trying to piece it all together. 'But you didn't die. You didn't die because the spell had already started. The magic transported you away before the lava could melt your bones. But where did Qweffor go? Where did you go?'

N°1 knew the answer to that question. 'He went into the future. He told our secrets to the humans in exchange for one of their storybooks and an ancient weapon from a museum.'

Abbot pointed the sword at him. 'I *was* going to let you live, impling.'

N°1 felt a knot of rage in his stomach. 'Like you *let me live* the last time? You told me to jump into the crater. You mesmerized me!'

Abbot was in a tough spot. He could order the Council to attack, but that would leave many questions unanswered, and he couldn't mesmerize everybody. But if he let Qwan keep talking, every one of his secrets could be exposed. What he needed was some time to think. Unfortunately, time was something he did not have. He would have to use his wits and weapons to get out of this situation.

'I mesmerized you! Don't be ridiculous. Demons don't have magic. We abhor magic. Abbot shook his head in disbelief. 'What am I even doing explaining myself to a runt like you? Shut your mouth, Number One, or I'll stitch it shut and throw you into the volcano.'

Qwan did not appreciate his new apprentice being threatened.

'I have had enough of you, N'zall. You would threaten warlocks? Number One, as you call him, has more power inside him than you will ever have.'

Abbot laughed. 'For once you are right, old warlock. I have no power inside me. Not a single spark of magic. What I do have is the power of my fist, and the strength of the pride behind me.'

Artemis was growing tired of this bickering.

'We don't have time for this,' he said, stepping out from behind Qwan. 'The time spell is unravelling and we need to make preparations for the journey home. For that journey, we need all the magic we can get. Including yours, N'zall or Abbot or whatever your name is.'

'I don't argue with humans,' growled Abbot. 'But if I did, I might repeat that I don't have any magic.'

'Oh, come on,' scoffed Artemis. 'I know the side effects of the *mesmer*. Including ragged pupils and bloodshot eyes. Some of your friends here have been mesmerized so much they barely have pupils any more.'

'And where did I get this magic?'

'You stole it in the time tunnel. I imagine you and Qweffor were literally melted together by the combination of lava and magic. When you emerged in Earth's recent past, you managed to hold on to some warlock magic.'

This was a bit of a stretch for everyone present. Abbot realized that he wouldn't need the *mesmer* to convince anybody that the human's theory was ridiculous. He could destroy this human's argument before destroying the human.

Abbot made a great show of scoffing at Artemis. He did the whole big tribe leader bit, running his nails along the curves of his horns, and barking out short bursts of laughter. Pretty soon, almost everyone else was laughing along.

'So, human,' said Abbot, when the furore had died down. 'I *stole* magic in the time tunnel. You must be losing your mind, Mud Boy. Maybe that's because I'm about to order my imps to skin your bones and suck the marrow from them. Even if what you say were possible, how would you know? How would a human know?' And Abbot grinned smugly, certain that no satisfactory answer could possibly be forthcoming.

Artemis Fowl grinned right back at him and pointed his index finger at the sky. Actually, it was his middle finger, due to the time-tunnel switch. From the tip of this finger sprang a

small blue spark which exploded like a tiny firework.

‘I know magic can be stolen,’ said Artemis. ‘Because I stole some myself.’

This piece of melodrama was greeted by a moment of stunned silence; then Qwan cackled loudly.

‘I said you were smart, Mud Boy. I was wrong, you are exceptional. Even in the time tunnel you were plotting. Stole a little magic, did you?’

Artemis shrugged, closing his fingers on the sparks. ‘It was floating around. I wondered what would happen if I embraced it.’

Qwan squinted at him. ‘Now you know. You are changed.

A magical creature like us. I hope you will use your gift wisely.’

‘Just what we need,’ moaned Holly. ‘Artemis Fowl with magical powers.’

‘I believe that if we count Mister N’zall here that makes five magical beings. Enough to reverse the time spell.’

Abbot was sunk and he knew it. The other demons were looking at him curiously. Wondering if he had been manipulating them magically. Even a few of the mesmerized Council were struggling to shake off their mental chains. It was only a matter of minutes before his dreams of kingship floated forever out of his reach.

There was only one option left to him.

‘Kill them all!’ he roared, not quite as fiercely as he would have liked. ‘Imps, you have free rein.’

The mesmerized Council members lurched into action, not quite as graceful in battle as they would normally be. The imps were so delighted to be given a chance to kill something with only two legs that they barged forward with unconfined glee.

‘Blood and guts!’ howled one, and they all took up the cry. It was not particularly eloquent, but it got the message across.

Holly was not particularly worried. Her Neutrino could fire as fast as she could aim, and with a wide beam setting she could stun the entire line of demons and imps before they could do any damage. In theory.

She elbowed Artemis aside, took a stand and began firing. The beams erupted from the pistol in a spreading cone pattern. Blasting the demons off their feet and keeping them down for at least ten minutes. Except for the ones that were getting back up immediately. Which seemed to be most of them. Even the imps were shaking off the blasts as if they were mere gusts of wind.

Holly frowned. This should not be happening. And she didn't dare raise the setting for fear of doing permanent damage. Something she would not risk under any circumstances.

'Qwan?' she said. 'My beam's not having much effect. Any ideas?'

Holly knew that warlocks weren't much use in combat situations. It was against their credo to harm, and they would only do so in the most dire situations. By the time Qwan overcame his pacifist nature, it would be too late.

While Qwan scratched his chin, Holly kept firing. Each pulse brought down a bunch of demons, but they were back on their feet in seconds.

'If the Council has been mesmerized, I can heal them,' concluded Qwan. 'But the brain is delicate; I need direct contact.'

'No time for that,' said Holly, loosing another burst. 'Artemis, have you got anything?'

Artemis had his hand on his stomach. 'I really need to use a bathroom. A second ago I was fine. But now...'

Holly really wished her wings were operational. If she could just get a bird's eye view on the targets, it would be much easier.

'Bathroom, Artemis? Is this really the time?'

One demon made it past the laser bursts. Close enough to smell. Holly ducked under his swinging mace, kicking him in the chest. The air left his lungs in a *whoof*, and the demon went down gasping for breath.

'I need the bathroom, and your Neutrino is having barely any effect. Time is speeding up. We're in a surge.' Artemis grabbed Holly's shoulder, causing a burst to sail off high and wide.

'I need to get to the bomb. It could explode at any moment.'

Holly shrugged him off. 'Safety tip, Artemis. Don't jiggle me when I'm firing. Qwan, can

you buy us some time?’

‘Time,’ said Qwan, smiling. ‘You know, it’s ironic that we need time because...’

Holly ground her teeth. Why did she always have to end up with the intellectuals?

Nº1 had been equal parts terrified and thoughtful during the attack. Terrified for the obvious reasons: dismemberment, painful death, etc. But also thoughtful. He was a warlock. There must be something he could do. Before he left the island, he would have been stunned into inactivity by the suddenness and ferocity of this attack. Now, it wasn’t even the worst thing he’d faced. Those security Mud Men in the chateau. The big ones with the suits and fire sticks. Nº1 could see them in his head, as clearly as though they were here.

Instead of allowing the sparks to roam on instinct, I marshal them into a recognizable form.

Nº1 concentrated on the human figures in his memory, wrapping them with magic, bringing them forth. He felt them solidifying as though the blood in his forehead were freezing. When the pressure became too much for his forehead, he expelled it into reality, conjuring up ghostly images of a dozen human mercenaries, blasting away with automatic weapons. It was a spectacular sight. Even Abbot reared back. The rest more than reared back – they turned and ran.

‘Nice, Qwan. Good thinking,’ said Artemis.

Qwan was puzzled. ‘You can read my thoughts? Oh, you mean the soldiers. That was not me. Number One is a very powerful little warlock. In ten years he could move this island on his own.’

Abbot was left standing ten paces from the group with his sword in his hand and a hailstorm of blue bullets cascading around him. In fairness to the pride leader, he stood his ground, facing certain death the demon way – with a sword in his hand and a snarl on his face.

Qwan shook his head. ‘Just look at that. It’s that kind of idiocy that got us into trouble in the first place.’

Abbot had some experience with magic, and he soon realized that these new humans and their missiles were mere illusions.

‘Come back, you fools,’ he shouted after his soldiers. ‘They can’t hurt you.’

Artemis tapped Holly's shoulder. 'Sorry to jiggle you again. But we need to get back to the bomb. All of us. And if possible, lure Abbot down there too.'

Holly put several bursts into Abbot's chest to buy them a couple of minutes. The pride leader flew backwards as though a giant had pounded his chest with a mallet.

'OK. Let's go. Artemis, you go ahead, I'll hold them off from the rear.'

They scrambled back into the crater, skidding on their heels through the ash crust. They made faster progress on the way down, but it was just as treacherous. It was hardest for Holly because she was moving backwards, ready to take a potshot at anyone who poked so much as a hair over the crater rim.

It was a scene from a five-year-old's nightmare. Acrid smells that burned the eyes and throat, a surface that sucked at the feet, a red sky and the sound of breath and heartbeats. Not to mention the constant fear that the demons were coming.

Things were about to get worse. The release of Qwan's displaced magical energy had accelerated the deterioration of the time spell and it was on the point of collapsing entirely. Unfortunately, this would happen in reverse order, starting on Hybras. Artemis knew this, but he hadn't had a spare second to run any calculations. Soon, he guessed – it would happen soon. And who could tell when *soon* was during a time surge?

Artemis realized that it was more than a guess. He knew the collapse of the tunnel was imminent. He could feel it. He was in touch with magic now. He was part of it and it was part of him.

Artemis pulled Qwan's arm round his shoulder, urging him forward.

'Quickly. We need to hurry.'

The old warlock nodded. 'You feel it? Chaos in the air. Look at Number One.'

Artemis glanced behind. N^o1 was on their heels, but his brow was furrowed with pain and he knuckled his forehead.

'He's sensitive,' gasped Qwan. 'Puberty.'

Suddenly, human puberty didn't seem so bad.

Holly was in trouble. Her years of training and experience hadn't prepared her for the moment when she would be retreating *into* a volcano, guarding a human and two members

of a supposedly extinct species during a time surge.

The surge was playing havoc with her bodily functions, but it was also having an effect on her gunfire. She was laying down a covering fire on the ridge but a cluster of blasts disappeared in mid-air.

Where do those shots go? Holly wondered briefly. Into the past?

Groups of ghost images fizzled into existence for a brief moment, giving the illusion that there were twice as many demons as there had been. Added to this she was suddenly struck with hunger cramps and she could swear her fingernails were growing.

Abbot's demons came fast, and not in a tight group as Holly had hoped. They had ranged themselves along the rim, and came over the top in a coordinated wave. It was a fearsome sight – dozens of warriors bounding over the lip, their markings glowing in the red light, teeth bared, horns quivering and bloodcurdling battle cries echoing around the crater walls. This was not like fighting trolls. Trolls had some basic smarts, but these demons were organized and battle ready. Already they knew to spread out and avoid the laser bursts.

Holly picked out the pride leader.

Hello there, Abbot, she thought. Whatever happens here, you're going home with a headache.

She loosed three bolts at him. Two disappeared, but one connected, sending Abbot tumbling into the dirt.

Holly did her best, widening the spread as much as possible, setting the trigger on automatic. If she'd had her full combat pack, then there wouldn't have been a problem. A few flash grenades at the right moment would have stunned the entire wave of demons, and a pulse assault rifle could have held them back for a few hundred years if necessary. As it was, she had one handgun, no back-up and a time surge gobbling half her rays. It seemed an impossible task to slow down Abbot and his goons long enough for Artemis to reach the bomb. And even if she did manage it, what then?

The demons kept coming, bent low and bobbing. They loosed bolts from their crossbows on the run, none of which were affected by the surge. Of course, they wouldn't be. The rays from her Neutrino were calibrated to have a short life: once they made contact with air, they would dissipate after five seconds unless specifically reset to hold together for longer.

Thankfully, the bolts were falling short, but not as short as they had been a few moments earlier. Time was running out in more ways than one.

A group of especially daredevil imps made it past Holly's arc of fire. Their method of travel was foolhardy and suicidal. Only idiot luck saved them from crushed skulls. Using a hide shield as a sled, three of them skidded down the crater's inner slope, being tossed hither and thither by rocks and changes in gradient.

One second they were fifty metres away, and the next Holly could smell the sweat glistening on their brow plates. Holly swung her gun barrel towards them, but it was too late; she could never make it. And even if she did, the others would use the distraction to make ground.

The imps were leering at her. Lips pulled back over sharp pointed teeth. One was especially agitated and had some kind of slime flowing from his pores.

The imps seemed to hang suspended in the air for the longest time, and then *something* happened. The air pulsed, and reality momentarily split into coloured pixels like a faulty computer screen. Holly felt sick to her stomach and the imps winked out of existence, taking a two-metre diameter tube of the crater with them.

Holly fell back from the hole, which collapsed in on itself.

N^o1 fell to his knees and threw up.

'Magic,' he gasped. 'Breaking down. The lure of Earth is stronger than silver now. No one is safe.'

Artemis and Qwan were in slightly better shape, but only slightly.

'I am older and have more control over my empathy,' said Qwan. 'That's why I didn't throw up.' And having said that, he threw up.

Artemis didn't even give the old warlock time to recover himself. There was no time. Time was surging and unravelling at the same time.

'Come on,' he said. 'Forward.'

Holly back-pedalled to her feet, pulling N^o1 to his. Behind them on the slopes, the demons froze at the sight of the disappearing imps, but now were advancing again with renewed determination. No doubt they believed that Holly was responsible for the

disappearance of their little brothers.

Temporal booms echoed around the island, as chunks of Hybras spun into the time tunnel. Some would materialize on Earth and some in space. It was doubtful that any demons unlucky enough to be transported would survive. Not without concentrated magic to forge a compass for them.

Artemis dragged himself the last few steps to the bomb, dropping to his knees beside it. He wiped ash from the read-out with his sleeve, then spent a while studying it, nodding along with the flickering of its digital timer.

The numbers of the timer were behaving seemingly erratically: jumping forward, slowing down and even backing up slightly. But Artemis knew that there would be a pattern in here somewhere. Magic was simply another form of energy, and energy conformed to certain rules. It was simply a matter of watching the timer and counting. It took a while longer than they could afford, but eventually Artemis spotted the repeat. He ran the numbers quickly in his head.

‘I see it,’ he shouted to Qwan, who was on his knees beside him. ‘It’s mainly forward. An hour per second for a count of forty, followed by a deceleration to thirty minutes per second for a count of eighteen, then a slight jump backwards in time, one minute per second back for a count of two. Then it repeats.’

Qwan smiled weakly. ‘What was the first one again?’

Artemis stood heaving the bomb from its cradle of ash and fungus.

‘Never mind. You need to prepare to transport this place. I’ll move this bomb to wherever you need it.’

‘Very well, smart Mud Boy. But we still only have four magical beings. We need N’zall.’

Holly backed into the group, still firing. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Qwan nodded. ‘I have faith in you, Captain. Then again I am a trusting person, and look where that got me.’

‘Where do you want this?’

Qwan considered. ‘We need to form a circle round it, so somewhere flat. Look, that level spot. There.’

Artemis began dragging the bomb towards the indicated spot. It wasn't so far. And then they could all stand round in a ring and watch it explode.

Everyone had their jobs to do now. And the chances of their tasks coming to fruition were slightly less than the chances of a dwarf-goblin marriage ever taking place. And a goblin would rather eat his own feet than marry a dwarf.

Artemis had to position the bomb. N°1 and Qwan were in charge of spell-casting, and Holly had the unenviable tasks of keeping them all alive, and persuading Abbot to join their group. And all this while the island was disintegrating around them.

The volcano was literally being torn apart. Huge segments vanished into space like parts of a giant three-dimensional jigsaw. In minutes, there would be nothing left to transport.

Qwan took N°1's hand in his own, leading him to the small level spot.

'OK, young fellow. That thing you did up there, with the soldiers – that was good. I was impressed. But this is the big time. I know you're in pain. That's just because you are sensitive to the spell's breakdown. But you have to ignore that. We have an island to move.'

N°1 felt his tail vibrate nervously. 'An island? An entire island?'

Qwan winked. 'And everyone on it. No pressure.'

'What do we do?'

'I only need one thing from you. Call up your magic, every drop. Let it pass through me and I'll do the rest.'

That *sounded* easy enough. But calling up magic when there were arrows flying and chunks of the countryside disappearing was about as easy as going to the toilet on command, with a dozen people watching. Who all hated you.

N°1 closed his eyes and thought magical thoughts.

Magic. Come on, magic.

He tried to open the same doors in his mind as he had when he had conjured up the human soldiers. To his surprise, he found the magic came easier now, as if it was ready to come out. The cage had been opened and the beast was free. N°1 felt the power surge

through his arms, animating him like a puppet.

‘Whoa there, big fellow,’ said Qwan. ‘No need to blow my head off. Put a leash on it until it’s time to go. ‘The old warlock shouted to Artemis, his thin voice almost whipped away by sonic booms. ‘How long?’

Artemis was dragging the bomb with some difficulty, digging his heels into the crust and heaving. He couldn’t help thinking that Butler would have simply slung the bomb and its casing over one shoulder and hefted it on to the plateau.

‘Count to three hundred. Maybe two ninety-nine. Providing the deterioration remains constant, which it should.’

Qwan had stopped listening after the words *three hundred*. He gripped N^o1’s hands tightly.

‘Five minutes and we’re going home. Time to start the mantra.’ Qwan closed his eyes and bobbed his head from side to side, muttering in the ancient demon tongue.

N^o1 could feel the power of the words, shaping the magic into rising circles of blue fire around them. He held on to his new mentor and joined in, repeating the mantra as if his life depended on it. Which, of course, it did.

Holly had a new mission now. Somehow she had to draw Abbot into their little group, and persuade him to join the magic circle. It seemed, judging by the way he was waving his fancy sword, highly unlikely that he would do this voluntarily.

The demon attack was mostly in disarray now, what with large tracts of the surroundings flashing off into another dimension, but Abbot and his Council members were as dogged as ever, forging ahead with barely a pause when some of their number disappeared.

Holly held her fire, wondering what was the best way to communicate with the pride leader. She was a trained negotiator, and suspected from her own observations and what N^o1 had told her, that Abbot had Acquired Situational Narcissism. He was completely in love with himself and his own importance in the community. Narcissists would often chose to die rather than accept what they saw as demotion. To Abbot, Holly would represent someone who was trying to remove him as pride leader, and therefore someone to be dealt with immediately.

Great, thought Holly. No matter what dimension you're in, there's a big-headed male trying to take over the world.

The demons were advancing in a ragged line. Abbot was at the head, waving his fancy sword, urging his mesmerized troops forward. The red sky was splitting into interwoven tendrils behind his head. The world as Abbot knew it was ending, but still he would not give up his position. Death for all before disgrace for him.

‘Call off your warriors, Abbot,’ shouted Holly. ‘We can talk about this.’

Abbot did not reply as such. Not unless howling and waving a sword could count as a reply.

The demons were spreading out even more now. Flanking her and avoiding being sucked off into another dimension all in one group. Abbot skidded ahead, digging his heels through the crust of ash, leaning his torso back to avoid tumbling. He was completely coated in ash now, even his ram's horns were grey. Grey maelstroms trailed behind him as each lurch forward threw up a thousand flakes.

There's nothing I can do, thought Holly. This guy wouldn't listen to his own mother. If he knew who his mother was.

There was no way out. She would have to up the charge and knock him senseless for a couple of hours. Qwan would have to put Abbot in the magic circle unconscious.

‘Sorry,’ she said, and flicked up the power setting above the pistol's thumb-rest.

Holly aimed with practised accuracy. The beam which pulsed from the Neutrino's barrel was a more dangerous red now, and should knock Abbot head over heels a couple of times.

I'll try not to enjoy that sight, thought Holly.

It was a sight she never got to enjoy, for at that precise moment the time surge reversed for a count of two. The beam disappeared into the past and Holly felt like throwing up as her atoms were scrambled once again by time quandary. She caught a glimpse of her ghostly past self less than a metre to her right. Out-of-focus past versions of the demons scrambled behind them like speed trails. Then the past was gone for another minute.

Abbot was still coming. Dangerously close now. Holly reckoned she had time for another shot. And with any luck, the demon Council would lose their singularity of purpose with

their leader out of the picture.

She adjusted her aim, then the world shattered before her like a broken mirror. A curved section of the earth rose above her like a tidal wave, then dematerialized in a glittering flurry of sparks. Holly caught a glimpse of alternate dimensions through the gaps. There was sun and space and enormous multi-tentacled creatures.

The sheer amount of magic present in the air squeezed Holly's head like a vice. She vaguely noted groaning behind her as Artemis and the others succumbed to the magical overload.

But she could not succumb. Some of the demons may have been sucked up into the time tunnel, but there could be more left. The air shimmered and settled. Rivulets of dust and rock spilled from mid-air. Huge chasms yawned all around, with nothing below but red space. There was more emptiness now than land.

Most of the demons were gone. Most, but not all. Abbot alone was left. Grinning maniacally, his sword extended before him.

'Hello, elf,' he said and plunged the sword into Holly's chest.

Holly felt the steel slide through the delicate membrane of elfin skin, between the eighth and ninth ribs, and lodge a millimetre below her heart. It was cold as ice and more painful than words can describe. She fell backwards, slipping off the slick blade, crashing through the crust of ash. Blood poured out of her like water from a ruptured vessel. Her own heart did gravity's work, emptying her veins with every beat.

'Magic,' she gasped, through the pain.

Abbot was jubilant. 'Magic cannot help you, elf. I've been working on this sword for a long time, in case the warlocks ever showed up. There's enough enchantment in this steel to stop an entire magic circle.' He shook the sword as he talked. Spittle sprayed from his mouth, and Holly's blood dripped from the blade, splattering lines on the ash.

Holly coughed; the action felt like it was splitting her in two. Magic could not help her here. There was only one person who could.

'Artemis,' she said, her voice weak and thin. 'Artemis, help me.'

Artemis Fowl glanced her way briefly, then returned his gaze to the bomb's timer, leaving

Holly Short to die on the ground. Which she did.

CHAPTER 15: HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN



ARTEMIS was hauling the bomb when the big shift came. The magical overspill hit him like a rugby tackle, driving him to his knees. For a moment his senses were completely overloaded and he was left gasping in a vacuum. Sight was first to return, distorted by tears and stars.

He checked the bomb's timer. Three minutes to go, providing the pattern did not disintegrate. He glanced to his left where Qwan and N°1 were returning to the business of conjuring, while over his right shoulder Holly was holding whatever demons were left. All around, the world was vibrating itself out of this existence. The noise was hellacious and the smell coated the inside of his nostrils.

The bomb was heavy enough to make Artemis's knuckles crack, and not for the first time, he wished Butler was at his side to take the strain. But he wasn't at his side, and wouldn't be again if Artemis did not get going. It was a simple plan: move the box to the plateau. Object A to point B. There was no sense in thinking about it.

Then Holly got stabbed and the plan got a lot more complicated.

Artemis saw the blade going in out of the corner of his eye. And worse still he heard the sound it made. A clean snick, like a key going into a lock.

This can't be real, he thought. We have been through too much together for Holly to be taken so quickly.

The sound the sword made coming out of Holly was hideous beyond imagination. Artemis knew that he would take that sound to his own grave.

Abbot was gloating now. 'Magic cannot help you, elf. I've been working on this sword for a long time.'

Artemis sank to his haunches, fighting the urge to crawl to Holly's side. Magic could not help Holly, but perhaps a combination of magic and science could. He forced himself to

ignore the spurts of deep red blood seeping from her wound. There was nothing in Holly Short's future but death.

Her current future. But the future could be changed.

Nº1 and Qwan had not seen the assault. They were deep in concentration, building the blue rings. Abbot was moving towards them now. The tip of his sword dripped blood on the ash like a leaky pen joining the dots to his next victims.

Holly spoke her last. 'Artemis,' she said. 'Artemis, help me.'

Artemis glanced at her. Once. Briefly. He shouldn't have. The sight of his friend dying almost threw off his count. And right now, the count was the most important thing.

Holly died without a friend to hold her hand. Artemis felt her go – another gift of the magic. He kept on counting, brushing away the tears on his cheeks.

Keep counting. That's all that matters.

Artemis rose, walking swiftly to his fallen friend. Abbot saw him go. He pointed the sword in Artemis's direction.

'You're next, Mud Boy. First the warlocks, then you. Once you are gone, things will return to how they were.'

Artemis ignored him, nodding along with the count in his head, making sure not to rush. The count must be accurate or all was lost.

Abbot elbowed his way between Qwan and Nº1. They were so focused that they barely realized that he was there. With two strokes of his cursed sword, the job was done. Nº1 fell backwards, blue magic trailing from his fingers. Qwan did not fall, because the tip of Abbot's sword was keeping him upright.

Artemis did not look into Holly's eyes. He could not. Instead, he prised the handgun from her hand and pointed it away from him.

Be careful now. Timing is everything.

Abbot yanked his sword from Qwan's chest, and the small body slumped lifelessly to the ground. Three dead in less time than it would take to tie a shoelace.

Artemis ignored the last breaths and the rhythmic crunching of ash that told him Abbot

was coming. Not that the demon was trying to hide it.

‘I’m back here, human. Why don’t you see if you can turn round in time.’

Artemis searched the volcano floor around Holly for footprints. There were many, but only two side by side, where Abbot had stood as he struck. All the while, he counted, remembering his own calculations.

An hour per second for a count of forty, followed by a deceleration to thirty minutes per second for a count of eighteen, then a slight jump backwards in time, one minute per second back for a count of two. Then it repeats.

‘Maybe I’ll keep you,’ chuckled Abbot, prodding Artemis’s back with his sword. ‘It’d be nice to have a pet human around. I could teach you tricks.’

‘I have a trick for you,’ said Artemis and he fired a single blast from the gun.

The blast exited the barrel, and then was whipped one minute into the past, just as Artemis had calculated it would be. It faded from the present and emerged just in time to strike the ghostly image of Abbot as he drew back his sword to thrust it into Holly.

The Abbot of one minute ago was lifted and tossed against the crater wall.

The present-time Abbot had barely time to say, ‘What happened?’ before he winked out of existence, no longer flesh, merely unrealized possibility.

‘You didn’t kill my friends,’ replied Artemis, though he was talking to himself. ‘That never happened.’

Artemis glanced down nervously. Holly was no longer there. *Thank God.*

Another quick glance told him that Qwan and N^o1 were back building their magic circle, as if nothing had happened.

Of course not. Nothing did happen.

Artemis concentrated on the memory. Picturing Abbot spinning through the air. He wrapped the incident in magic to preserve it.

Remember, he told himself. What he had just done, now never had to be done, and so wasn’t done. Except, of course, he *had* done it. Time quandaries such as these should be forgotten for the sake of sanity, but Artemis was loathe to surrender any of his memories.

‘Hey,’ said a familiar voice. ‘Don’t you have a job to do, Artemis?’

It was Holly. She was hog-tying Abbot with his own bootlaces.

Artemis could only stare at her and smile. He still felt the pain of her death, but that would heal quickly now that she was alive again.

Holly caught him smiling. ‘Artemis, could you get that box on to the plateau? It’s a simple plan.’

Artemis smiled some more, then shook himself. ‘Yes. Of course. Put the box on the plateau.’

Holly had been dead and now she was alive.

Artemis’s hand tingled with the phantom memory of a gun it may or may not have held moments before.

There will be consequences for this, he thought. You can’t alter events in time and be unaffected. But whatever the consequences are, I will bear them, because the alternative is too terrible.

He returned to his mission, dragging the bomb the final metres to the plateau. He kneeled, then put his shoulder into the casing, slotting the bomb between Qwan and N°1’s legs. N°1 didn’t even notice that Artemis was there. The little apprentice warlock’s eyes were solid blue now, flush with magic. The runes on his chest glowed, then began to move, swirling like snakes, slithering upwards to his neck and swirling on his forehead like an enchanted Catherine wheel.

‘Artemis! Give me a hand with this!’

It was Holly, struggling to roll Abbot’s unconscious body across the bumpy crater. With each revolution, the demon’s horns got snagged in the earth, ploughing a small furrow.

Artemis plodded across to her, legs aching from the climb and descent. He grabbed one horn and heaved. Holly took the other.

‘Did you shoot him?’ Artemis asked.

Holly shrugged. ‘I don’t know. May be. It got a bit hazy there for a minute. Must be the time spell.’

‘Must be,’ said Artemis, relieved that Holly didn’t remember what had happened. Nobody should have to remember dying, though he would be interested to find out what exactly came next.

Time was running every which way, including out. One way or another, the island of Hybras was not going to be here much longer. Either the time spell would take it in pieces, or Qwan would get a grip of the bomb’s energy and transport them back to Earth. Artemis and Holly dragged Abbot into the circle, dumping him at Qwan’s feet.

‘Sorry he’s out,’ said Holly. ‘It was that or dead.’

‘Difficult choice with this one,’ said Qwan, grabbing one of Abbot’s horns.

Artemis took the other, and between them they pulled Abbot into a kneeling position. There were now five in the circle.

‘I had been hoping for five warlocks,’ grumbled Qwan. ‘One warlock, one apprentice, an elf, a human and a snoring egomaniac were not exactly what I had in mind. This makes things a little more complicated.’

‘What can we do?’ asked Artemis.

Qwan shuddered and a blue film passed across his eyes.

‘D’Arvit,’ he swore. ‘This young one is powerful. I can’t hold him in much longer. Two more minutes of this and he’s going to melt our brains inside our skulls. I saw that once. Fluid boiling right out of the ears. Horrible.’

‘Qwan! What can we do?’

‘Sorry. I’m a little stressed here. OK. Here’s how it’s supposed to work. I’m going to lift us off, with junior’s help. When the device explodes, I’ll convert the energy to magic. Captain Short, you’re in charge of the where. Artemis, you’re in charge of the when.’

‘Where?’ said Holly.

‘When?’ said Artemis simultaneously.

Qwan gripped Abbot’s horn so tightly it creaked. ‘You know where this island goes, Holly – picture the spot. Artemis, let your time call to you. Allow it to reel you in. We cannot go back to our time. That would cause so many quandaries that the planet would probably just drop into a lower orbit and fry everything on it.’

‘I accept that,’ said Artemis. ‘But allow it to reel me in? I prefer some facts and figures. How about trajectories? Spatial addresses?’

Qwan was on his way into a trance. ‘No science. Just magic. Feel your way home, Artemis Fowl.’

Artemis frowned, disgruntled. *Feeling his way* was not how he generally did things. People who *felt their way* without hard scientific facts generally wound up broke or dead. But what choice did he have?

It was easier for Holly. Magic had always been a part of her life. It had been her minor in college and all LEP officers had to take regular in-service courses. In seconds her eyes were clouded with blue sparks and her inner magic had added a blue ring to the pulsing circles around them.

Visualize it, thought Artemis. *See where you want to go, or rather when you want to arrive.*

He tried, but even though the magic was in him, it was not of him. The fairies were lost in the spell casting, but Artemis Fowl could only gaze at the huge bomb at their feet, and marvel that they were waiting for it to explode.

A bit late for doubts now. After all, the whole ‘harness the bomb’s power’ notion was your idea.

It was true he had conjured a few sparks earlier. But that was different; he had done it without thinking. The sparks had been a flourish to make his point. Here, his magic could be what kept everyone on this island alive.

Artemis studied each member of the circle in turn. Qwan and N^o1 vibrated with unnatural speed. Their eyes were blue, and markings spun on their foreheads like mini-cyclones. Holly’s magic vented through her fingers, coating her hand in an almost liquid blue light. Abbot, of course, was unconscious, but his horns glowed blue and continuous streams of sparks shot from them, cascading over the group like a rock band’s special effect. In fact, this entire episode would not look out of place in a music video.

Around them, the island was suffering its own trauma. The time tunnel’s continued meltdown snatched up increasingly larger plots, whisking them off to other dimensions. The crackling hoops of power round them fused to form a magical hemisphere. It was not perfect though – gaps flowed across its surface, threatening the integrity of the entire structure.

I'm the problem, thought Artemis. I am not contributing.

Artemis felt himself on the verge of panic. Whenever this feeling claimed him, he ordered his mind to change gear and slip into a meditative mood. He did this now, feeling his heart slow and the impossible craziness around him slip away.

He concentrated on one thing. Holly's hand in his. Clutching his fingers with life and energy. Holly's fingers twitched, sending magical tendrils along Artemis's arm. In his relaxed state, he was receptive, and her magic sparked his own, drawing it from his brain. He felt the magic ignite in his nerve endings, filling him up, elevating his consciousness to another place. It was a euphoric experience. Artemis realized there were sections of his brain opening up that hadn't been used by humans for millennia. He also realized that humans must have had their own magic once, but had forgotten how to use it.

Ready? asked Qwan, but not aloud. They were sharing consciousness now, as they had been in the tunnel. But this was a clearer experience, like digital compared to radio waves.

Ready, replied the others, thought waves overlapping in a kind of mental harmony. But there was disharmony too, and struggle.

It's not enough, thought Qwan. *I can't seal the hemisphere. I need more from Abbot.*

The others pushed as hard as they could, but none of them had any more magic to give. Abbot would kill them all in his sleep.

Hello? Who's there? said a new voice, which was something you don't expect in a closed magic circle, even if it is your first one.

Along with the voice came a series of memories. Great battles, betrayal and a plunge into a fiery volcano.

Qweffor? said Qwan. *Is that you, boy?*

Qwan? Can it be you? Are you trapped here too?

Qweffor. The apprentice hauled into the volcano by Abbot back on Earth. Qwan instantly understood what must have happened.

No. We're in the magic circle once more. I need your power. Now!

Oh gods, Master Qwan. It's been so long. You wouldn't believe what this demon eats.

Power, Qweffor! Now! We can talk at the other end.

Oh, OK. Sorry. Nice to hear a warlock's thoughts again. After so long, I thought –

Power!

Sorry. On the way.

Moments later a strong pulse of power hummed through the circle. The magical hemisphere sealed, becoming a solid shield of light. Qwan redirected a small chunk of magic down to encircle the bomb itself. A high-pitched whistle emanated from the little golden sphere.

High C, thought Artemis absently.

Focus! admonished Qwan. *Take us to your time.*

Artemis focused on the important things he had left behind, and realized that they were all people. Mother, Father, Butler, Foaly and Mulch. Possessions that he had believed important now meant nothing. Except maybe his collection of Impressionist art.

Leave out the art, Artemis, warned Holly. Or we'll end up in the twentieth century.

Nineteenth, replied Artemis. *But I take your point.*

It may seem that all this bickering was a waste of valuable time, but it took place instantaneously. A million multi-sensory messages were exchanged along magical pathways, which made fibre-optic cables look about as efficient as two cans and a piece of string. Memories, opinions and secrets were laid bare for all to see.

Interesting, noted Artemis. *If I could recreate this, I could revolutionize the communications business.*

You were a statue? said Qweffor. *Am I reading this right?*

At the circle's centre, the bomb's timer was clicking towards zero. In a single second, the timer swept through the final hour on the clock. When the timer hit zero, a charge was sent to various detonators, including three dummies, to a block of plastic explosive the size of a small television set.

Here it comes, sent Qwan.

The bomb exploded, transforming the casing from a metal box into a million supersonic

darts. The inner shield stopped the darts dead, but absorbed their kinetic energy, adding it to the outer shield.

I saw that, thought Artemis, impressed. Very clever.

And he had seen it somehow. Some kind of lateral vision that allowed everyone to view events at their own pace, and from whatever point of view they preferred. It also allowed his mind to concentrate fully on his home time, while also appreciating the spectacle. Artemis decided to move his third eye outside the circle. Whatever happened to this island was certain to be pretty spectacular.

The explosion released the power of an electrical storm into a space the size of a four-man tent. Everything inside the space should have been vaporized but the flame and shock waves were contained by the small golden sphere. They roiled about in there, punching through in several places. Wherever this happened, the errant force was attracted to the blue rings of power and stuck to them like flashes of cloud-to-ground lightning.

Artemis watched some of these flashes shoot straight through his body and out the other side. But he was not injured; on the contrary, he felt energized, stronger.

Qwan's spell is keeping me safe, he thought. It's simple physics – energy cannot be destroyed, so he's converting it to another form: magic.

It was a spectacular sight. The bomb's energy fuelled the magic inside the circle, until the rolling orange flames were tamed by blue ones. Gradually, the bomb's power was consumed and transformed by sorcery. The rings glowed with a blinding blue light, and the figures inside the circle seemed to be composed from pure power. They shimmered insubstantially as the reverse time spell took hold of them.

Suddenly, the blue rings pulsed, injecting a shock wave of magic into the island itself. Transparency spread like water on the surface and below. Pulse followed pulse until the transparency spread beyond the crater. To the demons in their village, it must have seemed like the volcano was being eaten by the magic. The nothingness spread with each pulse, leaving only shimmering golden sparks where solid land was moments before.

The dematerialization reached the shore, and beyond to the ten metres of ocean carried here with the island. Soon, there was nothing left but the circle of magic, floating blue in the red rippled space of Limbo.

Qwan reached out to them.

Concentrate now. Artemis and Holly, take us home.

Artemis squeezed Holly's hand tightly. This was as close as they could ever be. Their minds were one.

Artemis turned and stared at his friend with blue eyes. Holly was staring back, and she was smiling.

'I remember,' she said aloud. 'You saved me.'

Artemis smiled back. 'It never happened,' he said.

And then their minds and bodies were split right down to subatomic level and whisked across galaxies and millennia.

Space and time did not have any recognizable form. It was not like flying in a balloon over a timeline and saying, 'Look, there's the twenty-first century. Take us down there.'

Everything was impressions and feelings. Artemis had to shut out the desires of the hundreds of demons around him and concentrate on his own internal compass. His mind would feel a longing for its own natural time, and he would just have to follow it.

The longing felt vaguely like a light warming his mind when he turned in its direction.

Good, thought Qwan. *Head towards the light.*

Is that a joke? Artemis asked.

No, replied Qwan. *I don't make jokes when there are hundreds of lives in the balance.*

Good policy, thought Artemis and turned towards the light.

Holly was concentrating on where to land the island. She was finding this incredibly easy. She had always treasured her above-ground memories, and now could call them up with amazing clarity. She remembered a school tour to the site where Hybras had been. In her mind's eye, she could see the undulating beach, gold and shining in the summer sunlight. She could see the blue-grey glint on a dolphin's back as it breached the waves to greet its fairy visitors. She could see the silver-flecked blackness of the water in what humans called Saint George's Channel. The light of all these memories warmed her face.

Good, sent Qwan. *Move ...*

I know. Move towards the light.

Artemis was trying to put this experience into words, for his diary. But he was finding it difficult – a novel experience for him.

I think I'll just concentrate on finding my own time, he thought.

Good idea, thought Qwan.

So you turned yourself into a statue? That was Qweffor again, dying to catch up.

Oh, for heaven's sake, grumbled Qwan. *See for yourself.* And he sent the relevant memories across to his old apprentice.

Everyone in the tunnel was treated to a cinematic rendering of the initial creation of the time tunnel, ten thousand years ago.

In their mind's eye, seven warlocks hovered above the very mouth of an active volcano, protected from the heat by a magical circle. This was an altogether more impressive affair than the improvised magic circle Artemis had previously witnessed. These warlocks were a confident, impressive crowd, swathed in elaborate robes. Their magical circle was actually a sphere of multicoloured light. What's more they did not need to get their boots dirty in the ash – they hovered seven metres above the volcano mouth. Chanting in deep bass tones, they poured bolt after bolt of magic into the magma until it began bubbling and convulsing. As the warlocks concentrated on inducing the volcano, Abbot and his partner Bludwin crept out from behind a rocky outcrop further up. And even though demon hides can endure great heat, both were sweating profusely.

With barely a pause to realize how moronic and shortsighted their plan was, the saboteurs leaped from the outcrop down towards the circle below. Bludwin, who was blessed with the twin gifts of idiocy and misfortune, missed every warlock in the circle and plunged flailing into the hissing lava. His body slightly raised the temperature of the surface lava, not significantly, but enough to taint the spell. Abbot connected with Qweffor, dragging him out of the circle and to the lip of the volcano. Abbot's hide immediately began steaming, and poor Qweffor, still in a magical stupor, was as helpless as a newborn under his weight.

All of this happened at the worst possible time. The spell was loose in the volcano now, and the warlocks could no more stop it than a mouse could hold back the sea.

A magically enhanced pillar of solid lava spewed red, orange and magnificent from the volcano, straight into the inverted cauldron of blue magic. Grimacing and in obvious distress, the warlocks converted the molten rock into pure power, pumping the energy back into the ground.

Abbot and Qweffor were caught simultaneously by the lava and the magical backwash. Qweffor, already in an insubstantial magical state, collapsed into a body-shaped cluster of stars, which were then absorbed into Abbot's body. Abbot twisted in agony, tearing at his own skin for a brief moment, then he was smothered in a deluge of magic and disappeared.

The warlocks maintained the spell for as long as they could, until most of the island had been transported to another dimension. But the lava kept coming from deep beneath the earth, and with the circle broken, they could not contain its savage might. It swatted them aside like a bear would swat annoying insects.

The stricken warlocks spiralled through the air in a rough line, smoke trailing behind them from their flaming robes. Their island was gone, their magic was spent and the ocean below was ready to crush their bones. There was only one chance for survival. Qwan called on his last sparks of magic and cast a gargoyle spell. The most basic of all warlock talents. In mid-air, the warlocks were petrified, and they fell in a tumbling line into the bubbling ocean far below. One died instantly when his head snapped off, two more lost arms and legs, and shock killed the rest. All except Qwan, who had known what was coming. They sank to the bottom of Saint George's Channel, where they would shelter generations of spider crabs for several thousand years.

For several thousand years, thought Qweffor. Maybe being stuck inside Abbot wasn't so bad.

Where is Abbot now? asked Artemis.

He's inside me, replied the apprentice. *Trying to get out.*

Good, thought Qwan. *I want a word with him.*

CHAPTER 16: POINT OF IMPACT



THIS time, the materialization was a painful process. Being separated from a thousand consciousnesses left Artemis with a deep sense of loss. For the first time in his life, he had completely belonged. He knew everyone and they knew him. There would always be a bond between them all, though the specifics of others' memories were already fading.

Artemis felt like an adhesive plaster that had been ripped off an enormous limb, and flung on the ground. He lay on the earth shivering. Sharing consciousness had felt so right that now it was as if he had just lost the use of several senses, including balance.

He opened his eyes, squinting through the sunlight.

Sunlight! They were on Earth! Though where and when remained to be seen.

Artemis rolled on to his stomach, then struggled slowly to all fours. The others lay in the crater, disorientated like him, but alive, judging by the moans and groans. He himself felt fine, except for a darting pain in his left eye. His vision was sharp, but slightly yellowed, as though he was wearing pale sunglasses. Holly the soldier was already on her feet, coughing the ash from her lungs. When her airways were clear, she helped Artemis to his feet.

She winked at Artemis. 'Blue sky. We did it.'

Artemis nodded. 'Perhaps.' The wink drew his attention to her left eye. It seemed as though they hadn't made it through the tunnel unaltered.

'Look at me, Holly. Do you notice anything different?'

'This isn't anything to do with puberty, is it?' said Holly, smiling; then she noticed...

'Your eyes. They've changed. One blue and one hazel.'

Artemis smiled. 'You too. We swapped in transit. Just the eye as far as I can make out.'

Holly thought about this for a moment, then ran her hands over her head and body.

'Everything's in place, thank goodness. Except now I have a human eye.'

‘It could have been a lot worse,’ said Artemis. ‘You could have been travelling with Mulch.’

Holly winced. ‘Now that you mention it.’

A solitary blue dot of magic sparkled inside Holly’s new eyeball, reducing it in size slightly.

‘That’s better,’ she sighed. ‘I had a blinder of a headache.

Your new eye must be too small; why don’t you use your ill-gotten magic to fix it?’

Artemis tried, closed his eyes and concentrated. But nothing happened.

‘It seems as though the transplant did not take. I must have used all I had in the tunnel.’

Holly punched his shoulder lightly. ‘Maybe you passed it on to me. I feel great – that time tunnel was like a magical mud bath. Maybe it’s just as well that you lost your magic. The last thing the People need is a magical criminal mastermind running around above ground.’

‘A pity,’ sighed Artemis. ‘The possibilities were endless.’

‘Here,’ said Holly, taking his head in her hands. ‘Let me fix you up.’

Her fingertip glowed blue and Artemis felt his new eye expand slightly in his socket. A single tear ran down his cheek and the headache disappeared.

‘A pity I was unable to do it myself. Being magical for even a short while was simply...’

‘Magical?’

Artemis smiled. ‘Exactly. Thank you, Holly.’

Holly smiled back. ‘It’s the least I can do for someone who brought me back to life.’

Qwan and N^o1 were on their feet. The old warlock was trying not to look too smug, and N^o1 was wiggling his tail experimentally.

‘You never know what that tunnel will do to you,’ he explained. ‘I lost half a finger last time. It was my favourite finger too.’

‘Rarely in my tunnels,’ said Qwan. ‘My tunnels are works of beauty. If the other warlocks were alive, they would give me a medal. Where is Qweffor, by the way?’

Qweffor was buried up to his waist in an ash mound. Head down. Qwan and N^o1 hauled

him out by the boots. He lay spluttering and snorting on the ground.

‘Do you need a handkerchief?’ asked N°1. ‘All that ash and mucus coming out of your nose is horrible.’

Qweffor wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

‘Shut up, Runt!’

N°1 took a step backwards, which would prove not to be quite enough.

‘Runt?’ he squeaked. ‘You’re not Qweffor, you’re N’zall!’

‘Abbot!’ roared the demon, reaching up and grasping N°1 by the throat. ‘The name is Abbot.’

Holly had her gun out and powered up before Abbot finished his sentence.

‘Let him go, Abbot!’ she shouted. ‘You can’t escape. There’s nowhere to escape to. Your world is gone.’

The ex-pride leader was actually crying. ‘I know it’s gone. This runt took it from me! Now I will take his life from him.’

Holly sent a warning shot over Abbot’s head. ‘The next one is between your eyes, demon.’

Abbot hefted N°1, using him as a shield. ‘Shoot now, elf. Put us both out of our misery.’

A change had come over N°1. Initially, he had been snivelling – standard N°1 behaviour – but now the tears were drying on his cheeks, and his eyes were hard.

Every time things are going right for me, Abbot ruins it, he thought. I am so fed up of this demon. I wish he was gone.

This was a big breakthrough for N°1. Usually, when he found himself in a bad situation, N°1 wished himself away. This time he was wishing someone else would disappear. Enough was finally enough, so N°1 broke through a lifetime of conditioning and talked back to Abbot.

‘I want to speak to Qweffor,’ he said, in a trembling voice.

‘Qweffor’s gone!’ shouted Abbot, spraying spittle on N°1’s neck. ‘All that is left is his magic. My magic!’

‘I want to speak to Qweffor,’ repeated his hostage, with a little more volume.

For Abbot, this latest insubordination was the wind that burst the dwarf’s bum-flap. Even though he was bereft of land and lackeys, Abbot decided that he would not bear impudence from an imp. He tossed N^o1 upwards, spinning him in the air and gripping his shoulders as the imp descended. N^o1 came down face to face with Abbot, the demon’s horns brushing his ears. Abbot’s eyes were wide and crazy, and his teeth were slick with saliva.

‘You’re not long for life, little Runt.’

If Abbot had been paying closer attention to his captive, he might have noticed that N^o1’s eyes were filmed with blue, and his markings glowed and shimmered. But, as usual, Abbot was only interested in his own plight.

N^o1 wriggled his hands upwards, grabbing Abbot by the horns.

‘How dare you!’ said Abbot incredulously. Touching a demon’s horns was tantamount to a challenge.

N^o1 stared into his captor’s eyes. ‘I said, I want to talk to Qweffor.’

Abbot heard him that time, because the voice wasn’t N^o1’s. It was a voice of pure magic, layered with undeniable power.

Abbot blinked. ‘I’ll... eh... see if he’s in.’

It was too late for compliance: N^o1 wasn’t about to rein in his power now. He sent a magical probe into Abbot’s brain via the horns. The horns glowed bright blue and then began shedding large brittle flakes.

‘Careful with the horns,’ said Abbot blearily, then his eyes rolled back in his head. ‘The ladies love the horns.’

N^o1 rooted round in Abbot’s head for a while until he found Qweffor sleeping in a dark corner, in a place scientists would call the limbic system.

The problem, realized N^o1, is that there is only room in every head for one consciousness. Abbot needs to go somewhere else.

And so, with this instinctive knowledge and absolutely no expertise, N^o1 fed Qweffor’s consciousness until it expanded, occupying the entire brain. It was not a perfect fit, and

poor Qweffor would suffer from twitches and sudden loss of bowel control at public functions, a syndrome which would become known as Abbot's Revenge. But at least he was in control of a body, most of the time.

After several years and three hearings, fairy warlocks would manage to rehouse Abbot's consciousness in a lower life form. A guinea pig, to be precise. The guinea pig's own consciousness was soon subjugated by Abbot's. Warlock interns would often amuse themselves by throwing tiny swords into the pig's pen, and crack up watching the little piggy trying to pick them up.

Qweffor blinked Abbot's eyes.

'Thanks, Number One,' he said, placing the smaller warlock on the ground. 'He's always been too strong for me, but now he's gone. I'm free...' Qweffor studied his new arms. 'And I have muscles.'

Holly lowered her gun, resting a hand on her thigh.

'That must be it. Surely our troubles are over?'

Artemis felt the earth tilt a fraction below them. He dropped to one knee, laying the flat of his hands on the ground.

'I hate to say this, Holly, but I think we're sinking.'

The sinking thing turned out not to be as serious as it sounded. Of course it *was* serious – after all, an island was sinking. But there was help at hand.

Holly realized this when her barely functional wrist computer was suddenly flooded with crackling LEP chatter.

The sky is a projection, she thought. They're waiting for us.

Suddenly, where there had been nothing, hundreds of fairy vehicles appeared in the air above the island. Emergency services air ambulances flew in decreasing circles, searching for landing spots. Huge demolition platforms were guided down by tugpods, and an LEP shuttle dropped straight into the volcano.

The pod had the slick lines of a teardrop and a non-reflective surface that made it

difficult to see, even with the shield powered down.

‘They were expecting us,’ said Artemis, unsurprised. ‘I thought as much.’

Nº1 sneezed. ‘Thank goodness. I am so fed up of this volcano. It’s going to take a month to get this crater stink out of my plates.’

‘No, no,’ said Qwan, linking arms with his new apprentice. ‘You can vent your pores magically. It’s a very handy talent.’

Holly waved her arms to attract the shuttle, though there was no need. The carrier’s scanners would have already scanned, categorized and checked the LEP database for a match for each one of them.

The shuttle spun and reversed down to them tail first. Its jets blasted moving furrows in the ash.

‘Wow,’ said Qwan. ‘Those ships are fabulous. The People have been busy.’

‘A lot has happened in ten thousand years,’ said Holly, holding up her palms to show the pilot she was not holding a weapon. Again, probably not necessary, but with Ark Sool in command of the LEP, nothing could be taken for granted.

Four grappler hooks shot from the corners of the shuttle, smashing through the crater crust into the rock below. Once they had a solid grip, they reeled the craft in for a landing. The rear door slid across and Foaly came trotting down the ramp, dressed in a custom-tailored, four-legged LEP jumpsuit. He skidded down the incline to Holly, digging his back hooves through the crust.

‘Holly!’ he said, hugging her tightly. ‘You made it back. I knew you would.’

Holly hugged the centaur back.

‘And I knew you’d be here waiting.’

Foaly reached an arm round Artemis’s shoulders. ‘Well, when Artemis Fowl says he’ll be back, you know it’s going to take a lot more than space and time to stop him.’ Foaly shook hands with Nº1 and Qwan. ‘I see you brought quite a few guests.’

Holly smiled, her teeth white against a face of streaked ash.

‘Hundreds.’

‘Anyone we need to worry about?’

‘No. A few have been mesmerized, but a couple of sessions in therapy should straighten that.’

‘OK, I’ll pass it on,’ said the centaur. ‘Now we have to cut the reunion short and board immediately. We have thirty minutes to sink this island and pack up this entire facility.’

Facility? thought Artemis. *They’ve had time to set up a facility. Just how long have we been away?*

They climbed the ramp and strapped themselves into gel-padded bucket seats in the sparsely furnished rear. There were no comforts here, just seats and gun racks. A medic fairy scanned them all in turn, then shot a cocktail of inoculations and germ killers into their arms, just in case Hybras had brewed up any mutant diseases over the past ten thousand years. A true professional, the medic did not bat an eye examining Qwan and N°1, even though he’d never met their like before.

Foaly sat beside Holly.

‘I can’t tell you how good it feels to see you, Holly. I requested this assignment. I’m on leave from Section Eight. This entire facility is my design. Biggest single project I ever worked on, designed for a thirty-minute walkaway. I knew you’d make it back.’

Holly thought about that statement for a moment. *She was an assignment?*

The shuttle reeled in the grippers and peeled away from the crater wall. In seconds they breached the mouth like a bullet from a gun. The vibration was enough to rattle teeth for the first few seconds, then the stabilization fins snicked out the side and calmed the ride down.

‘I am glad to see the end of that volcano,’ said N°1, trying to appear casual, even though he was flying around in a metal teardrop. After all, this was not his first flight.

Foaly laid the heel of his hand on the porthole rim, peering downwards.

‘You really are seeing the last of it. As soon as we have everybody off the island, those demolition rigs are going to turn the laser cutters on it. We’re going to slice it up and then remote-deflate the buoys underneath. Let ’er down slow. That way, no tidal waves. The water displacement alone was enough to send a few big rollers in towards Dublin, but we

boiled 'em up from space. Once the island is down, we can pack up the shield and go home.'

'Oh,' said N^o1, who hadn't understood much of what had been said.

Artemis looked out of the porthole at his elbow. On the island below, demons were being guided into shuttles by rescue teams. Once the crafts took off, they switched on their shields and shimmered from view.

'You gave us quite a scare, Holly,' laughed Foaly. 'Coming back twenty miles off target like that. We had to light a fire under our pilots to get over here and get the projection up. Luckily, it's early in the morning, and the tide is low. We've got about half an hour before the first fishing boats get out here.'

'I see,' said Holly slowly. 'Big budget stuff. Sool must have been spitting fire.'

Foaly snorted. 'Sool? He can spit what he wants out of whatever end he wants. He got drummed out of the force a couple of years ago. Do you realize that traitor wanted to let the entire eighth family die off? The moron actually said as much in a memo.'

Holly gripped the arms of her seat. 'A couple of years ago? How long have we been gone?'

Foaly snapped his fingers. 'Oh, uh, yeah. I wasn't supposed to just blurt it out. Sorry. I mean it's not serious, like a thousand years or anything.'

'How long, Foaly?' demanded Holly.

The centaur thought about it for a moment. 'OK. You've been gone for nearly three years.'

Qwan reached over and slapped Artemis's shoulder. 'Three years! Nice going, Mud Boy. You must have one hell of a brain to get us that close. I wasn't expecting to see this side of the century.'

Artemis was stunned. Three years! His parents hadn't seen him for three years. What torture had he put them through? How could he ever make up for it?

Foaly was trying to fill the shocked silence with information. 'Mulch has kept the PI firm ticking over. Well, more than that, actually – it's thriving. He signed up a new partner. You'll never guess who. Doodah Day. Another criminal turned do-gooder. Wait till he hears

you're back. He calls me every day. I have a pain in my tail trying to explain quantum physics to that dwarf.'

Holly reached across and took Artemis's hand.

'There's only one way to look at this, Artemis. Think of all the lives you've saved. That's worth a few years, surely.'

Artemis could only stare straight ahead. Dying in the transfer would have been a grade one disaster; this was surely a grade two. What could he say? How could he explain himself?

'I need to get home,' he said, sounding for once like an actual fourteen-year-old. 'Foaly, would you tell the pilot where I live.'

The centaur chuckled. 'Like every law enforcement agent under the world doesn't know where Artemis Fowl lives. Anyway, no need to go that far. Someone is waiting for you on shore. He's been there for quite a while.'

Artemis placed his forehead against the porthole. He felt so tired suddenly, as though he had actually been awake for three years. How could he even begin to explain events to his parents? He knew how they must be feeling – exactly how he felt when his father had gone missing. Perhaps he had already been declared dead, as his father had been? And even though his return would bring happiness, that pain would always be there underneath the surface.

Foaly was talking to the demons.

'Who's this little guy?' he asked, tickling N^o1 under the chin.

'That little guy is Number One,' said Qwan. 'He's the most powerful warlock on the planet. He could fry your brain by accident, say if you were tickling him under the chin, and he got irritated.'

The centaur withdrew his finger sharpish. 'I see. I like him. We're going to get along just fine. Why are you called Number One? Is that a nickname?'

N^o1 felt the magic inside him, comfortable like heated veins. 'It was my imp name. But now, I think I'll keep it.'

Qwan was surprised. 'What? You don't want the QW name? That's traditional. We

haven't had a Qwandri in a while. What about Qwerty?'

Nº1 shook his head. 'I am Number One. The name used to mark me out as different; now it makes me unique. I have no idea where we are, or where we're going, but I already feel more at home than I ever have.'

Foaly rolled his eyes. 'Excuse me while I get a tissue. Honestly, I thought you demons were warlike and stoic. This little guy sounds like one of those cheap romance novels.'

'The little guy who could fry your brain,' Qwan reminded him.

'One of those cheap romance novels that I happen to adore,' said Foaly, backing away slowly.

Nº1 smiled contentedly. He was alive and he had helped to save the island. Finally, he knew his place in the universe. Now that Abbot was taken care of, he could live his life the way he wanted to. And the first thing he would do, when things had settled down, would be to track down the demoness with the red markings very much like his own, and see if maybe she would share a meal with him. A cooked meal. It could be that they had a lot to talk about.

The shuttle slipped through the shield into the morning sky. The jagged rocks of the Irish coast jutted out from waves, sun-speckled by the early light. It was going to be a fine day. There were trace clouds to the north, but nothing that could keep people inside for long.

There was a group of houses clustered around an inlet, and in the horseshoe harbour, fishermen were already on the sand, setting up their nets.

'This is your stop, Artemis,' said Foaly. 'We'll drop you behind the quay wall. I'll give you a call in a few days, for debriefing.' The centaur reached out a hand, laying it on Artemis's shoulder. 'The People thank you for your efforts, but you know that everything you have learned is confidential. Not even your parents, Artemis. You'll have to think of something besides the truth to tell them.'

'Of course,' said Artemis.

'Good. I didn't have to say it, I know. Anyway, the man you want is in the little cottage with the window boxes. Say hello from me.'

Artemis nodded numbly. 'I will.'

The pilot swung in low, tucking the shuttle out of sight behind a deserted, ramshackle stone building. When he was certain that there was nobody in the sight lines, the pilot hit a green light over the rear door.

Holly helped Artemis out of his chair.

‘We never get to hang out,’ she said.

Artemis half chuckled. ‘I know. There’s always a crisis.’

‘If it’s not goblin gangs, it’s time-travelling demons.’

Holly kissed him on the cheek. ‘That was probably dangerous. You being a pubescent volcano.’

‘I’ve got it under control, just about.’

Holly pointed to her new blue eye. ‘We’ll always be a part of each other now.’

Artemis tapped the cheek below his fairy hazel eye. ‘I’ll keep an eye out for you.’

‘Was that a joke? My goodness, you are changing.’

Artemis was a little dazed. ‘Well, apparently I’m almost eighteen.’

‘God help us all. Artemis Fowl, eligible to vote.’

Artemis chuckled. ‘I’ve been voting for years.’ He tapped his ring-phone. ‘Call you later.’

‘I have a feeling we’ll have a lot to talk about.’

They hugged briefly, but tightly, then Artemis walked down the ramp. He took three steps and looked back, but there was nothing there but sea and sky.

Artemis Fowl made for strange early morning viewing in the village of Duncade. A lone teenager in a tattered suit, leaving a trail of ash behind him as he climbed through a stone stile, and half stumbled along the quay front.

There was a small group ahead of him, leaning on a concrete bollard. One shaggily bearded fisherman was telling a wild story about a six-metre wave he had seen during the night which had simply evaporated before it reached the shore. He told the story well, complete with big arm gestures and whooshing noises. The other men nodded to his face,

while behind his back winking and making *drinky drinky* motions with their hands.

Artemis ignored them, walking further down the quay front to the cottage with window boxes.

Window boxes? Who would have thought.

There was a keypad on the door – it looked out of place in such a rustic setting, but Artemis would have expected no less. He keyed in his own birthday, zero one zero nine, deactivating the lock and interior alarm.

It was dark inside, curtains drawn, lights off. Artemis stepped inside to a spartan living area, with functional kitchen, one chair and a sturdy wooden table. There was no television, but rudimentary shelves had been erected to store hundreds of books on various subjects. As Artemis's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could make out some of the titles. *Gormenghast*, *The Art of War* and *Gone With the Wind* being among them.

'You are full of surprises, old friend,' murmured Artemis, reaching out to touch the spine of *Moby Dick*.

As he traced the embossed title, a small red dot of light appeared on his fingertip.

'You know what that is?' said a low, rumbling voice behind him. If thunder could speak, then this would be its voice.

Artemis nodded. This was no time for outbursts or sudden moves.

'Good. Then you know what happens if you do anything to upset me.'

Another nod.

'Excellent, you're doing very well. Now lace your fingers behind your head and turn round.'

Artemis did as he was told, and found himself facing a huge man with a full beard and long hair drawn back in a ponytail. Both were flecked with grey. The man's face was familiar, but different. There were more lines round the eyes, and a deep frown slash between them.

'Butler?' said Artemis. 'Are you behind all that hair?'

Butler stepped back as though struck. His eyes widened and he swallowed rapidly,

suddenly parched.

‘Artemis? Is it... You’re the wrong age! I always thought –?’

‘The time tunnel, old friend,’ explained Artemis. ‘I saw you only yesterday.’

Butler was not yet convinced. He moved quickly to the curtains, and in his haste pulled them, rail and all, away from the wall. The red light of sunrise flooded the small room. Butler turned to his young guest and took the boy’s face in his hands. With massive thumbs, he wiped the grime from round Artemis’s eyes.

What he saw in those eyes almost buckled his knees.

‘Artemis, it is you. I had begun to think... No, no. I knew you would come back.’ And then again with more belief. ‘I *knew* it. I always knew it.’

The bodyguard wrapped Artemis in arms strong enough to break a bear’s back. Artemis could have sworn he heard sobs, but when Butler released him, he was his usual stoic self.

‘Sorry about the beard, and the hair, Artemis. I was blending in with the natives. How was your ...eh ... trip?’

Artemis felt the sting of tears in his own eyes. ‘Um, eventful. If it hadn’t been for Holly, we never would have made it.’

Butler studied Artemis’s face. ‘Something is different. My God, your eyes!’

‘Oh, yes. I have one of Holly’s now. It’s complicated.’

Butler nodded. ‘We can swap stories later. There are calls to be made.’

‘Calls?’ said Artemis. ‘More than one?’

Butler plucked a cordless phone from its cradle. ‘There are your parents, of course, but I should call Minerva too.’

Artemis was surprised. Pleasantly so. ‘Minerva?’

‘Yes. She’s been over here several times. Almost every school holiday, in fact. We’ve become good friends. She’s the one who started me reading fiction.’

‘I see.’

Butler pointed the phone aerial at Artemis. ‘It’s Artemis this and Artemis that. She has

really built you up to be something special. You're going to have to work hard not to disappoint her.'

Artemis swallowed. He had been hoping for a break, not more challenges.

'Of course, she's grown up a bit, even if you haven't,' continued Butler. 'And quite the beauty. Sharp as a samurai sword too. There's a young lady who could give you a run for your money at chess.'

Then again, thought Artemis. *Nothing like a challenge to keep the brain active. But that could come later.*

'My parents?'

'You just missed them. They were here yesterday, for the weekend. They stay in the local guest house whenever they can.' Butler laid a hand on Artemis's shoulder. 'These last few years. It's been terrible for them. I told them everything, Artemis. I had to.'

'Do they believe you?'

Butler shrugged. 'Some days they do. Mostly my fairy stories just add to their pain. They think I've been driven mad with guilt. And even though you're back, things will never be the same again. It would take a miracle to erase my stories and their suffering.'

Artemis nodded slowly. *A miracle.* He lifted his hand. On the palm there was a slight graze from his climb over the quayside stile. Artemis concentrated and five blue sparks of magic leaped from his fingertips and zeroed in on the graze, wiping it out like a cloth wiping dirt. He had more magic left than he had pretended.

'Maybe we can arrange a miracle.'

Butler was beyond further amazement. 'That's a new trick,' he said laconically.

'I picked up a little more than an eye in the time tunnel.'

'I see,' said Butler. 'Just don't do it around the twins.'

'Don't worry,' said Artemis. 'I won't.' Then his brain computed what Butler had actually said.

'What twins?'

Butler punched in the Fowl Manor phone number, smiling. 'Maybe time stood still for

you, big brother, but it didn't for the rest of us.'

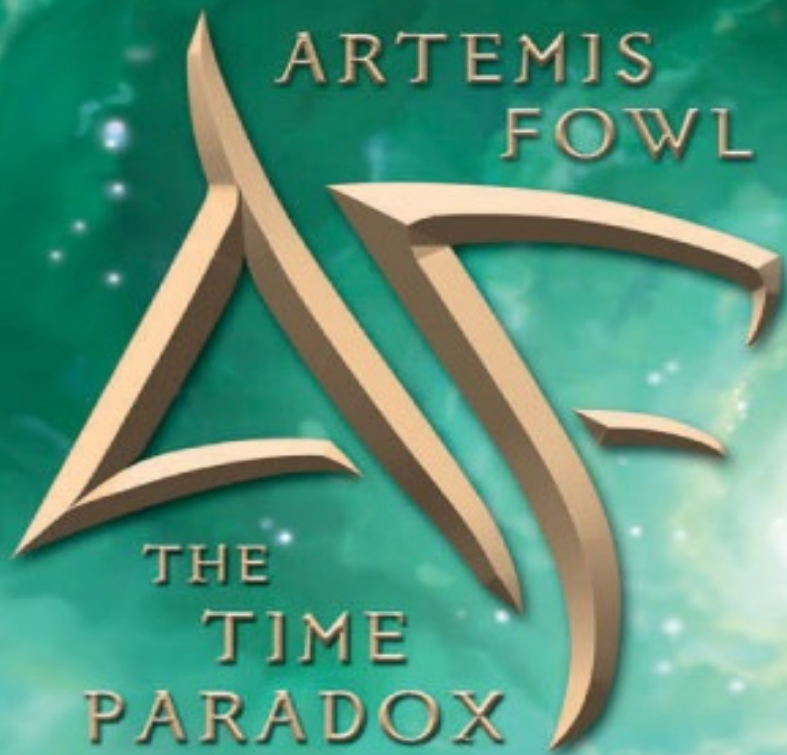
Artemis stumbled to the room's only chair and sank into it.

Big brother? he thought, and then...

Twins!

THE END

ARTEMIS
FOWL



THE
TIME
PARADOX



EOIN COLFER



THE TIME
PARADOX

EOIN COLFER

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Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident

Artemis Fowl: The Eternity Code

Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception

Artemis Fowl: The Lost Colony

Artemis Fowl: The Graphic Novel

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*For Grace: a new daughter,
granddaughter, niece, and cousin*

PROLOGUE

Fowl Manor

Barely an hour north of Dublin's fair city lies the Fowl estate, where the boundaries have changed little in the past five hundred years.

The manor house is not visible from the main road, shrouded by a fan of oak trees and a parallelogram of high stone walls. The gates are reinforced steel with cameras perched upon their pillars. Were you allowed to pass through these discreetly electrified portals, you would find yourself on a pea-gravel avenue, meandering gently through what was once a manicured lawn, but has now been encouraged to evolve to a wild garden.

The trees grow dense as you approach the manor itself, soaring oak and horse chestnut intermingled with more delicate ash and willow. The only signs of cultivation are a driveway free of weeds and the glowing lamps that float overhead, seemingly without tether or cable.

Fowl Manor has been the site of many grand adventures over the centuries. In recent years the adventures have had more of a magical bent, though most of the Fowl family have been kept in the dark about this fact. They have no idea that the main lobby was completely destroyed when the fairy folk sent a troll to do battle with Artemis, the family's eldest son and a criminal mastermind. He was twelve years old at the time. Today, however, Fowl activity in the manor is entirely legal. There are no fairy special forces storming the battlements. No elfin police officers held captive in the cellar. Nor any signs of a centaur fine-tuning his listening devices or running thermal scans. Artemis has made peace with the Fairy People, and formed solid friendships among their ranks.

Though his criminal activities earned Artemis much, they cost him more. People he loved were distraught, injured, and even abducted because of his schemes. For the past three years his parents thought him dead while he fought demons in Limbo. And on his return, he was flabbergasted to find that the world had moved on without him, and he was now the older brother to two-year-old twin boys, Beckett and Myles.

ESPRESSO AND TREACLE

Artemis sat on an oxblood leather armchair, facing Beckett and Myles. His mother was in bed with a slight case of the flu, his father was with the doctor in her room, and so Artemis was lending a hand in entertaining the toddlers. And what better entertainment for youngsters than some lessons?

He had decided to dress casually in a sky blue silk shirt, light gray woolen pants, and Gucci loafers. His black hair was swept back from his forehead, and he was putting on a jolly expression, which he had heard appealed to children.

“Artemis need toilet?” wondered Beckett, who was squatting on the Tunisian rug, wearing only a grass-stained sweater, which he had pulled down over his knees.

“No, Beckett,” said Artemis brightly. “I am trying to look jolly. And shouldn’t you be wearing a diaper?”

“Diaper,” snorted Myles, who had potty trained himself at the age of fourteen months, building a stepladder of encyclopedias to reach the toilet seat.

“No diaper,” pouted Beckett, slapping at a still-buzzing fly trapped in his sticky blond curls. “Beckett hates diaper.”

Artemis doubted that the nanny had neglected to put a diaper on Beckett, and he wondered briefly where that diaper was now.

“Very well, Beckett,” continued Artemis. “Let’s shelve the diaper issue for now, and move on to today’s lesson.”

“Chocolate on shelves,” said Beckett, stretching his fingers high to reach imaginary chocolate.

“Yes, good. There is sometimes chocolate on the shelves.”

“And espresso,” added Beckett, who had a strange set of favorite tastes, which included espresso sachets and treacle—in the same cup, if he could manage it. Once Beckett had managed to down several spoons of this concoction before it was wrested away from him. The toddler hadn’t slept for twenty-eight hours.

“Can we learn the new words, Artemis?” asked Myles, who wanted to get back to a mold jar in his bedroom. “I am doing ’speriments with Professor Primate.”

Professor Primate was a stuffed monkey, and Myles’s occasional lab partner. The cuddly toy spent most of its time stuffed into a borosilicate glass beaker on the *’speriment* table. Artemis had reprogrammed the monkey’s voice box to respond to Myles’s voice with twelve phrases, including *It’s alive! It’s alive!* and *History will remember this day, Professor Myles.*

“You can go back to your laboratory soon,” said Artemis approvingly. Myles was cut from the same cloth as himself, a natural-born scientist. “Now, boys, I thought today we might tackle some restaurant terms.”

“Sneezes look like worms,” said Beckett, who wasn’t one for staying on topic.

Artemis was nearly thrown by this remark. *Worms* were most definitely not on the menu, though snails might well be. “Forget about worms.”

“Forget worms?” said Beckett, horrified.

“Just for the moment,” said Artemis reassuringly. “As soon as we have finished our word game, you may think on whatever pleases you. And if you are really good, then I might take you to see the horses.”

Riding was the only form of exercise that Artemis had taken to. This was mainly because the horse did most of the work.

Beckett pointed to himself. “Beckett,” he said proudly, worms already a distant memory.

Myles sighed. “Simple-toon.”

Artemis was beginning to regret scheduling this lesson, but having begun he was determined to forge ahead.

“Myles, don’t call your brother a simpleton.”

“S’okay, Artemis. He likes it. You’re a simple-toon, aren’t you, Beckett?”

“Beckett simple-toon,” agreed the small boy happily.

Artemis rubbed his hands together. “Right, brothers. Onward. Imagine yourself seated at a café table in Montmartre.”

“In Paris,” said Myles, smugly straightening the cravat that he had borrowed from his father.

“Yes, Paris. And try as you will, you cannot attract the waiter’s attention. What do you do?”

The infants stared at him blankly, and Artemis began to wonder if he wasn’t pitching his lesson a little high. He was relieved, if a little surprised, to see a spark of comprehension in Beckett’s eyes.

“Umm . . . tell Butler to jump-jump-jump on his head?”

Myles was impressed. “I agree with simple-toon.”

“No!” Artemis said. “You simply raise one finger and say clearly ‘*Ici, garçon.*’”

“Itchy what?”

“What? No, Beckett, not *itchy.*” Artemis sighed. This was impossible. *Impossible.* And he hadn’t even introduced the flash cards yet or his new modified laser pointer, which could either highlight a word or burn through several steel plates, depending on the setting.

“Let’s try it together. Raise one finger and say ‘*Ici, garçon.*’ All together now . . .”

The little boys did as they were told, eager to please their deranged brother.

“*Ici, garçon,*” they chorused, pudgy fingers raised. And then from the corner of his mouth, Myles whispered to his twin, “Artemis simple-toon.”

Artemis raised his hands. “I surrender. You win, no more lessons. Why don’t we paint some pictures?”

“Excellent,” said Myles. “I shall paint my jar of mold.”

Beckett was suspicious. “I won’t learn anything?”

“No,” said Artemis, fondly ruffling his brother’s hair and immediately regretting it. “You won’t

learn a thing.”

“Good. Beckett happy now. See?” The boy pointed to himself once more, specifically to the broad smile on his face.

The three brothers were stretched on the floor, up to their elbows in poster paint, when their father entered the room. He looked tired from his nursing duties, but otherwise fit and strong, moving like a lifelong athlete in spite of his bio-hybrid artificial leg. The leg used lengthened bone, titanium prosthetics, and implantable sensors to allow Artemis Senior’s brain signals to move it. Occasionally, at the end of the day, he would use a microwavable gel pouch to ease his stiffness, but otherwise he behaved as if the new leg were his own.

Artemis climbed to his knees, smudged and dripping.

“I abandoned French vocabulary and have joined the twins in play.” He grinned and wiped his hands. “It’s quite liberating, actually. We are finger painting instead. I did try to sneak in a little lecture on cubism, but received a splattering for my troubles.”

Artemis noticed then that his father was more than simply tired. He was anxious.

He stepped away from the twins and walked with Artemis Senior to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase.

“What is the matter? Is Mother’s influenza worsening?”

Artemis’s father rested one hand on the rolling ladder and lifted his weight from the artificial limb. His expression was strange, and one that Artemis could not recall ever seeing.

He realized his father was more than anxious. Artemis Fowl Senior was afraid.

“Father?”

Artemis Senior gripped the ladder’s rung with such force that the wood creaked. He opened his mouth to speak, but then seemed to change his mind.

Now Artemis himself grew worried. “Father, you must tell me.”

“Of course,” said his father with a start, as if just remembering where he was. “I must tell you. . . .”

A tear fell from his eye, dropping onto his shirt, deepening the blue.

“I remember when I first saw your mother,” he said. “I was in London, at a private party in The Ivy. A room full of scoundrels, and I was the biggest one in the bunch. She changed me, Arty. Broke my heart then put it together again. Angeline saved my life. Now . . .”

Artemis felt weak with nerves. His blood pounded in his ears like the Atlantic surf.

“Is Mother dying, Father? Is this what you are trying to tell me?”

The idea seemed ludicrous. Impossible.

His father blinked as if waking from a dream.

“Not if the Fowl men have something to say about it, eh, son? It’s time for you to earn that reputation of yours.” Artemis Senior’s eyes were bright with desperation. “Whatever we have to do, son. Whatever it takes.”

Artemis felt panic welling up inside him.

Whatever we have to do?

Be calm, he told himself. You have the power to fix this.

Artemis did not yet have all the facts, but nonetheless he was reasonably confident that whatever was wrong with his mother could be healed with a burst of fairy magic. And he was the only human on

Earth with that magic running through his system.

“Father,” he said gently. “Has the doctor left?”

For a moment the question seemed to puzzle Artemis Senior; then he remembered. “Left? No. He is in the lobby. I thought you might talk to him. Just in case there’s a question I may have missed. . . .”

Artemis was only mildly surprised to find Dr. Hans Schalke, Europe’s leading expert on rare diseases, in the lobby, and not the usual family practitioner. Naturally his father would have sent for Schalke when Angeline Fowl’s condition began to deteriorate. Schalke waited below the filigreed Fowl crest, a hard-skinned Gladstone bag standing sentry by his ankles like a giant beetle. He was belting a gray raincoat across his waist and speaking to his assistant in sharp tones.

Everything about the doctor was sharp, from the arrowhead of his widow’s peak to the razor edges of his cheekbones and nose. Twin ovals of cut glass magnified Schalke’s blue eyes, and his mouth slashed downward from left to right, barely moving as he talked.

“All of the symptoms,” he said, his accent muted German, “on all of the databases, you understand?”

His assistant, a petite young lady in an expensively cut gray suit, nodded several times, tapping the instructions onto the screen of her smartphone.

“Universities too?” she asked.

“All,” said Schalke, accompanying the word with an impatient nod. “Did I not say all? Do you not understand my accent? Is it because I am from Germany coming?”

“Sorry, Doctor,” the assistant said contritely. “All, of course.”

Artemis approached Dr. Schalke, hand outstretched. The doctor did not return the gesture.

“Contamination, Master Fowl,” he said without a trace of apology or sympathy. “We have not determined whether your mother’s condition is contagious.”

Artemis curled his fingers into his palm, sliding the hand behind his back. The doctor was right, of course.

“We have never met, Doctor. Would you be so good as to describe my mother’s symptoms?”

The doctor huffed, irritated. “Very well, young man, but I am not accustomed to dealing with children, so there will be no sugarcoating.”

Artemis swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

Sugarcoating.

“Your mother’s condition is possibly unique,” said Schalke, banishing his assistant to her work with a shake of his fingers. “From what I can tell, her organs seem to be failing.”

“Which organs?”

“All of them,” said Schalke. “I need to bring equipment here from my laboratory at Trinity College. Obviously your mother cannot be moved. My assistant, Imogen, Miss Book, will monitor her until my return. Miss Book is not only my publicist but an excellent nurse. A useful combination, wouldn’t you say?”

In his peripheral vision, Artemis saw Miss Book scurry around a corner, stammering into her smartphone. He hoped the publicist/nurse would display more confidence when caring for his mother.

“I suppose. All my mother’s organs? *All* of them?”

Schalke was not inclined to repeat himself. “I am reminded of lupus, but more aggressive,

combined with all three stages of Lyme disease. I did observe an Amazonian tribe once with similar symptoms, but not so severe. At this rate of decline, your mother has days left to her. Frankly, I doubt we will have time to complete tests. We need a miracle cure, and in my considerable experience, miracle cures do not exist.”

“Perhaps they do,” said Artemis absently.

Schalke picked up his bag. “Put your faith in science, young man,” advised the doctor. “Science will serve your mother better than some mysterious force.”

Artemis held the door for Schalke, watching him walk the dozen steps to his vintage Mercedes-Benz. The car was gray, like the bruised clouds overhead.

There is no time for science, thought the Irish teenager. Magic is my only option.

When Artemis returned to his study, his father was sitting on the rug with Beckett crawling along his torso like a monkey.

“May I see Mother now?” Artemis asked him.

“Yes,” said Artemis Senior. “Go now, see what you can find out. Study her symptoms for your search.”

My search, thought Artemis. There are difficult times ahead.

Artemis’s hulking bodyguard, Butler, waited for him at the foot of the stairs wearing full kendo armor, the helmet’s face guard folded away from his weathered features.

“I was in the dojo, sparring with the holograph,” he explained. “Your father called and told me I was needed immediately. What’s going on?”

“It’s Mother,” said Artemis, passing him. “She’s very ill. I’m going to see what I can do.”

Butler hurried to keep pace, his chest plate clanking. “Be careful, Artemis. Magic is not science. You can’t control it. You wouldn’t want to accidentally make Mrs. Fowl’s condition worse.”

Artemis arrived at the top of the grand stairway, tentatively reaching his hand toward the bedroom door’s brass knob as though it were electrified.

“I fear that her condition couldn’t be worse. . . .”

Artemis went inside alone, leaving the bodyguard to strip off the kendo headgear and *hon-nuri* breastplate. Underneath he wore a tracksuit instead of his traditional wide-legged trousers. Sweat blossomed across his chest and back, but Butler ignored his desire to go and shower, standing sentry outside the door, knowing that he shouldn’t strain too hard to listen, but wishing that he could.

Butler was the only other human who knew the full truth of Artemis’s magical escapades. He had been at his young charge’s shoulder throughout their various adventures, battling fairies and humans across the continents. But Artemis had made the journey through time to Limbo without him, and Artemis had come back changed. A part of Butler’s young charge was magical now, and not just Captain Holly Short’s hazel left eye that the time stream had given him in place of his own. On the journey from Earth to Limbo and back, Artemis had somehow managed to steal a few strands of magic from the fairies whose atoms were mixed with his in the time stream. When he had returned home from Limbo, Artemis had *suggested* to his parents in the compelling magical *mesmer* that they simply not think about where he had been for the past few years. It wasn’t a very sophisticated plan, as his disappearance had made the news worldwide, and the subject was raised at every function the Fowls attended. But until Artemis could get hold of some LEP mind-wiping equipment, or indeed develop

his own, it would have to suffice. He *suggested* to his parents that if anyone were to ask about him, they simply state it was a family matter and ask that their privacy be respected.

Artemis is a magical man, thought Butler. The only one.

And now Butler just knew Artemis was going to use his magic to attempt a healing on his mother. It was a dangerous game; magic was not a natural part of his makeup. Artemis could well remove one set of symptoms and replace them with another.

The boy entered his parents' bedroom slowly. The twins charged in here at all hours of the day and night, flinging themselves on the four-poster bed to wrestle with his protesting mother and father, but Artemis had never experienced that. His childhood had been a time of order and discipline.

Always knock before entering, Artemis, his father had instructed him. *It shows respect.*

But his father had changed. A brush with death seven years earlier had shown him what was really important. Now he was always ready to hug and roll in the covers with his beloved sons.

It's too late for me, thought Artemis. I am too old for tussles with Father.

Mother was different. She was never cold, apart from during her bouts of depression when his father had been missing. But fairy magic and the return of her beloved husband had saved her from that, and now she was herself again. Or she had been until now.

Artemis crossed the room slowly, afraid of what lay before him. He walked across the carpet, careful to tread between the vine patterns in the weave.

Step on a vine, count to nine.

This was a habit from when he was little, an old superstition whispered lightly by his father. Artemis had never forgotten, and always counted to nine to ward off the bad luck should so much as a toe touch the carpet vines.

The four-poster bed stood at the rear of the room, swathed in hanging drapes and sunlight. A breeze slipped into the room, rippling the silks like the sails of a pirate ship.

One of his mother's hands, pale and thin, dangled over the side of her bed.

Artemis was horrified. Just yesterday his mother had been fine. A slight snuffle, but still her laughing, warm self.

"Mother," he blurted upon seeing her face, feeling as though the word had been punched out of him.

This was not possible. In twenty-four hours his mother had deteriorated to little more than a skeleton. Her cheekbones were sharp as flint, her eyes lost in dark sockets.

Don't worry, Artemis told himself. In a few short seconds Mother will be well; then I can investigate what happened here.

Angeline Fowl's beautiful hair was frizzed and brittle, broken strands crisscrossing her pillow like a spiderweb. And there was an odd smell emanating from her pores.

Lilies, thought Artemis. Sweet, yet tinged with sickness.

Angeline's eyes opened abruptly, round with panic. Her back arched as she sucked a breath through a constricted windpipe, clutching at the air with clawed hands. Just as suddenly she collapsed, and Artemis thought for a terrible moment that she was gone.

But then her eyelids fluttered and she reached a hand for him.

"Arty," she said, her voice no more than a whisper. "I am having the strangest dream." A short

sentence, but it took an age to complete, with a rasped breath between each word.

Artemis took his mother's hand. How slender it was. A parcel of bones.

"Or perhaps I am awake and my other life is a dream."

Artemis was pained to hear his mother speak like this; it reminded him of the odd turns she used to suffer from.

"You're awake, Mother, and I am here. You have a light fever and are a little dehydrated, that's all. Nothing to be concerned about."

"How can I be awake, Arty?" said Angeline, her eyes calm in black circles. "When I feel myself dying. How can I be awake when I feel that?"

Artemis's feigned calm was knocked by this.

"It's the . . . fever," he stammered. "You're seeing things a little strangely. Everything will be fine soon. I promise."

Angeline closed her eyes. "And my son keeps his promises, I know. Where have you been these past years, Arty? We were so worried. Why are you not seventeen?"

In her delirium, Angeline Fowl saw through a haze of magic to the truth. She realized that he had been missing for three years and had come home the same age as he had gone away.

"I am fourteen, Mother. Almost fifteen now, still a boy for another while. Now close your eyes, and when you open them again, all will be well."

"What have you done to my thoughts, Artemis? Where has your power come from?"

Artemis was sweating now. The heat of the room, the sickly smell, his own anxiety.

She knows. Mother knows. If you heal her, will she remember everything?

It didn't matter. That could be dealt with in due time. His priority was to mend his parent.

Artemis squeezed the frail hand in his grip, feeling the bones grind against each other. He was about to use magic on his mother for the second time.

Magic did not belong in Artemis's soul and gave him lightning-bolt headaches whenever he used it. Though he was human, the fairy rules of magic held a certain sway over him. He was forced to chew motion sickness tablets before entering a dwelling uninvited, and when the moon was full, Artemis could often be found in the library listening to music at maximum volume to drown out the voices in his head—the great commune of magical creatures. The fairies had powerful race memories, and they surfaced like a tidal wave of raw emotion, bringing migraines with them.

Sometimes Artemis wondered if stealing the magic had been a mistake, but recently the symptoms had stopped. No more migraines or sickness. Perhaps his brain was adapting to the strain of being a magical creature.

Artemis held his mother's fingers gently, closed his eyes, and cleared his mind.

Magic. Only magic.

The magic was a wild force and needed to be controlled. If Artemis let his thoughts ramble, the magic would ramble too, and he could open his eyes to find his mother still sick but with different-color hair.

Heal, he thought. Be well, Mother.

The magic responded to his wish, spreading along his limbs, buzzing, tingling. Blue sparks circled his wrists, twitching like schools of tiny minnows. Almost as if they were alive.

Artemis thought of his mother in better times. He saw her skin radiant, her eyes shining with

happiness. Heard her laugh, felt her touch on his neck. Remembered the strength of Angeline Fowl's love for her family.

That is what I want.

The sparks sensed his wishes and flowed into Angeline Fowl, sinking into the skin of her hand and wrist, twisting in ropes around her gaunt arms. Artemis pushed harder, and a river of magical flickers flowed from his fingers into his mother.

Heal, he thought. Drive out the sickness.

Artemis had used his magic before, but this time was different. There was resistance, as though his mother's body did not wish to be healed and was rejecting the power. Sparks fizzled on her skin, spasmed, and winked out.

More, thought Artemis. More.

He pushed harder, ignoring the sudden blinding headache and rumbling nausea.

Heal, Mother.

The magic wrapped his mother like an Egyptian mummy, snaking underneath her body, raising her six inches from the mattress. She shuddered and moaned, steam venting from her pores, sizzling as it touched the blue sparks.

She is in pain, thought Artemis, opening one eye a slit. In agony. But I cannot stop now.

Artemis dug down deep, searching his extremities for the last scraps of magic inside him.

Everything. Give her every last spark.

Magic was not an intrinsic part of Artemis; he had stolen it and now he threw it off again, stuffing all he had into the attempted healing. And yet it wasn't working. No, worse than that. Her sickness was growing stronger. Repelling each blue wave, robbing the sparks of their color and power, sending them skittering to the ceiling.

Something is wrong, thought Artemis, bile in his throat, a dagger of pain over his left eye. It shouldn't be like this.

The final drop of magic left his body with a jolt, and Artemis was thrown from his mother's bedside and sent skidding across the floor, then tumbling head over heels until he came to rest, sprawled against a chaise longue. Angeline Fowl spasmed a final time, then collapsed back onto her mattress. Her body was soaked with a strange, thick, clear gel. Magical sparks flickered and died in the coating, which steamed off almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Artemis lay with his head in his hands, waiting for the chaos in his brain to stop, unable to move or think. His own breathing seemed to rasp against his skull. Eventually the pain faded to echoes, and jumbled words formed themselves into sentences.

The magic is gone. Spent. I am entirely human.

Artemis registered the sound of the bedroom door creaking, and he opened his eyes to find Butler and his father staring down at him, concern large on their faces.

"We heard a crash; you must have fallen," said Artemis Senior, lifting his son by the elbow. "I should never have let you in here alone, but I thought that perhaps you could do something. You have certain talents, I know. I was hoping . . ." He straightened his son's shirt, patted his shoulders. "It was stupid of me."

Artemis shrugged his father's hands away, stumbling to his mother's sickbed. It took a mere glance to confirm what he already knew. He had not cured his mother. There was no bloom on her cheeks or ease in her breathing.

She is worse. What have I done?

“What is it?” asked his father. “What the devil is wrong with her? At this rate of decline, in less than a week my Angeline will be—”

Butler interrupted brusquely. “No giving up now, gents. We all have contacts from our past that might be able to shed some light on Mrs. Fowl’s condition. People we might prefer not to associate with otherwise. We find them and bring them back here as fast as we can. We ignore nuisances like passports or visas and get it done.”

Artemis Senior nodded, slowly at first, then with more vigor.

“Yes. Yes, dammit. She is not finished yet. My Angeline is a fighter, are you not, darling?”

He took her hand gently, as though it were made of the finest crystal. She did not respond to his touch or voice. “We talked to every alternative practitioner in Europe about my phantom limb pains. Perhaps one of them can help us with this.”

“I know a man in China,” said Butler. “He worked with Madame Ko at the bodyguard academy. He was a miracle worker with herbs. Lived up in the mountains. He has never been outside the province, but he would come for me.”

“Good,” said Artemis Senior. “The more opinions we can call on the better.” He turned to his son. “Listen, Arty, do you know someone who might be able to help? Anyone. Perhaps you have some underworld contacts?”

Artemis twisted a rather ostentatious ring on his middle finger so that the front rested against his palm. This *ring* was actually a camouflaged fairy communicator.

“Yes,” he said. “I have a few underworld contacts.”

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST

Helsinki Harbor, the Baltic Sea

The giant sea monster that is the kraken sent its finned tentacles spiraling toward the ocean's surface, pulling its bloated body behind. Its single eye rolled manically in its socket, and its curved beak, the size of a schooner's prow, was open wide, filtering the rushing water through to its rippling gills.

The kraken was hungry, and there was room for only one thought in its tiny brain as it sped toward the holiday ferry above.

Kill ... Kill ... KILL ...

“That is such dwarf manure,” said Captain Holly Short of the Lower Elements Police, muting the sound file in her helmet. “For one thing, the kraken doesn't have tentacles, and as for ‘kill, kill, kill’ . . .”

“I know,” said Foaly, the voice of mission control in her communicator. “I thought you might enjoy that passage. You know, have a laugh. Remember laughing?”

Holly was not amused. “It's so typical of humans, Foaly, to take something perfectly natural and demonize it. Krakens are gentle creatures, and the humans turn them into some kind of murderous giant squid. ‘Kill, kill, kill.’ Give me a break.”

“Come on, Holly, it's just sensational fiction. You know those humans and their imaginations. Relax.”

Foaly was right. If she got worked up every time the human media misrepresented a mythical creature, she would spend half her life in a rage. Over the centuries Mud Men had caught glimpses of the fairy folk, and had twisted the truth of these glimpses almost beyond recognition.

Let it go. There are decent humans. Remember Artemis and Butler.

“Did you see that human movie with the centaurs?” she asked the centaur on the other end of her helmet communicator. “They were noble and sporty. ‘My sword for thee, Majesty, then off for a spot of hunting.’ Fit centaurs, now that did make me laugh.”

Thousands of miles away, somewhere in the earth's mantle below Ireland, Foaly, the Lower Elements Police's technical adviser, rubbed his paunch.

“Holly, that hurts. Caballine likes my belly.”

Foaly had got married, or *hitched*, as centaurs called the ceremony, while Holly had been away with Artemis Fowl, rescuing demons in Limbo. A lot had changed in the three years she had been away, and sometimes Holly was finding it difficult to keep up. Foaly had a new bride to occupy his time. Her old friend Trouble Kelp had been promoted to LEP Commander, and she was back working at Recon with the Kraken Watch task force.

“Apologies, friend. That was mean,” said Holly. “I like your belly too. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there to see a hitching sash around it.”

“Me too. Next time.”

Holly smiled. “Sure. That’s going to happen.”

Traditionally, male centaurs were expected to take more than one bride, but Caballine was a modern fairy, and Holly doubted if she would stand for a new filly in the household.

“Don’t worry, I’m joking.”

“You’d better be, because I’m meeting Caballine at the spa this weekend.”

“How’s the new gear?” said Foaly, hurriedly changing the subject.

Holly spread her arms wide, feeling the wind ripple her fingers, seeing the Baltic Sea flash past below in shards of blue and white.

“It’s wonderful,” she said. “Absolutely wonderful.”

* * *

Captain Holly Short of LEPrecon flew in wide lazy circles above Helsinki, enjoying the brisk Scandinavian air filtering through her helmet. It was just after five a.m. local time, and the rising sun set the Uspenski Cathedral’s golden onion dome shimmering. Already the city’s famed marketplace was strobed with headlights as vendors arrived to open up for the morning trade, or eager politicians’ aides made their way toward the blue-gray facade of city hall.

Holly’s target lay away from what would shortly be a bustling center of commerce. She adjusted her fingers, and the sensors in her armored gloves translated the movements to commands for the mechanical wings on her back, sending her spiraling down toward the small island of Uunisaari, half a mile from the port.

“The body sensors are nice,” she said. “Very intuitive.”

“It’s as close as it gets to being a bird,” said Foaly. “Unless you want to integrate?”

“No thank you,” Holly said vehemently. She loved flying, but not enough to have a LEP surgeon stick a few implants in her cerebellum.

“Very well, Captain Short,” said Foaly, switching to business mode. “Pre-op check. Three W’s, please.”

The three W’s were every Reconnaissance officer’s checklist before approaching an operation’s zone: wings, weapon, and a way home.

Holly checked the transparent readouts on her helmet visor.

“Power cell, charged. Weapon on green. Wings and suit fully functional. No red lights.”

“Excellent,” said Foaly. “Check, check, and check. Our screens agree.”

Holly heard keys clicking as Foaly recorded this information in the mission log. The centaur was known for his fondness for old-school keyboards, even though he himself had patented an extremely efficient virtual keyboard.

“Remember, Holly, this is just reconnaissance. Go down and check the sensor. Those things are two hundred years old, and the problem is more than likely a simple overheat. All you need to do is go where I tell you and fix what I tell you. No indiscriminate blasting involved. Understand?”

Holly snorted. “I can see why Caballine fell for you, Foaly. You’re such a charmer.”

Foaly snickered. “I don’t rise to jibes anymore, Holly. Marriage has mellowed me.”

“Mellowed? I’ll believe that when you last ten minutes in a room with Mulch without throwing a hoof.”

The dwarf Mulch Diggums had been at various times enemy, partner, and friend to Holly and Foaly. His greatest pleasure in life was stuffing his face, and not far behind that was irritating his various enemies, partners, and friends.

“Perhaps I need a few more years of marriage before I get *that* mellow. A few more centuries, in fact.”

The island was large in Holly’s visor now, surrounded by a monk’s fringe of foam. Time to stop the chitchat and proceed with the mission, though Holly was tempted to circle in a holding pattern so she could talk some more with her friend. It seemed as though this was the first real conversation they’d had since her return from Limbo. Foaly had moved on with life in the past three years, but for Holly her absence had lasted only a few hours, and, though she had not aged, Holly felt cheated of those years. The LEP psychiatrist would have told her she was suffering from Post-time-travel-displacement Depression, and offered to prescribe a nice shot to cheer her up. Holly trusted happy-shots just about as much as she trusted brain implants.

“I’m going in,” she said tersely. This was her first solo mission since debriefing, and she did not want anything less than a perfect report, even if it was only Kraken Watch.

“Copy,” said Foaly. “You see the sensor?”

There were four bio-sensors on the island relaying information back to Police Plaza. Three pulsed a gentle green in Holly’s visor display unit. The fourth sensor was red. Red could mean many things. In this case, *every* reading had risen above normal levels. Temperature, heartbeat, brain activity. All on the danger line.

It must be a malfunction, Foaly had explained. *If not, the other sensors would show something.*

“I have it. Strong signal.”

“Okay. Shield and approach.”

Holly twisted her chin sharply left until her neck bone clicked, which was her way of summoning the magic. It wasn’t a necessary movement, since the magic was mostly a brain function, but fairies developed their own tics. She let a dribble of power into her limbs and vibrated out of the visible spectrum. Her Shimmer Suit picked up her frequency and amplified it so that a tiny spark of magic went a long way.

“I’m out of sight and going in,” she confirmed.

“Understood,” said the centaur. “Be careful, Holly. Commander Kelp will be reviewing this video, so stick to your orders.”

“Are you suggesting that I occasionally stray from the rule book?” said Holly, apparently horrified by the very notion.

Foaly sniggered. “I am suggesting that you may not own a copy of the rule book, and if you do possess one, you certainly have never opened it.”

Fair point, thought Holly, swooping down toward the surface of Uunisaari.

Whales are thought to be the world's largest creatures. They are not. The kraken can stretch to three miles in length and have been a staple of Scandinavian legend since the thirteenth century, when they appeared in the Orvar-Odd saga as the fearsome *lyngbakr*. Early descriptions of the kraken are the most accurate, describing the sea creature as an animal the size of a floating island whose real danger to ships was not the creature itself, but the whirlpool it created when it sank into the ocean. But by the Middle Ages the legend of the kraken had been confused with that of the giant squid, and each credited with the most fearsome attributes of the other. The squid was pictured as big as a mountain, while the peaceful kraken grew tentacles and developed a bloodlust to rival that of the deadliest shark.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The kraken is a docile creature whose main defenses are its sheer size and the bulk of shell, gas, and fat cells enclosing a melon-size brain, which provides it with just enough intelligence to feed itself and shed its shell. Underneath the crust of rock, weed, and coral, the kraken resembles nothing more than the common acorn barnacle, albeit a barnacle that could easily house an Olympic stadium or two.

Kraken enjoy a lifespan of several thousand years, thanks to an incredibly slow metabolism and a huge network of support systems surrounding their soft centers. They tend to settle in a food-rich or magical environment and remain there until the food or energy residue runs out. Nestling in the middle of an archipelago near a human port provides not only camouflage but an abundant source of edible material. And so this is where kraken are found, anchored to the seabed like gigantic limpets, vacuuming city waste through their gills and fermenting it into methane in their vast stomachs. But if human garbage is their salvation, it is also their damnation, for increasingly high toxin levels have rendered the kraken sterile, and now there are less than half a dozen of the ancient creatures left in the oceans.

This particular kraken was the oldest of the bunch. According to shell scrapings, old Shelly, as the small dedicated Kraken Watch referred to it, was more than ten thousand years old, and had been masquerading as an island in Helsinki Harbor since the sixteenth century, when the town was known as Helsingfors.

In all that time, Shelly had done little but feed and sleep, feeling no urge to migrate. Any need he may have felt to move on was dulled by the seepings of a paint factory built on his back more than a hundred years previous. For all intents and purposes, Shelly was catatonic, having emitted no more than a couple of methane flashes in over fifty years, so there was no reason to believe that this red light on his sensor was anything more than a crossed wire, and it was Holly's job to *uncross* it. It was a standard first-day-back-on-the-job kind of mission. No danger, no deadline, and little chance of discovery.

Holly turned her palms into the wind, descending till her boots scraped the roof of the island's small restaurant. Actually there were two islands, separated by a small bridge. One was a genuine island, and the other larger section was old Shelly nestled into the rock. Holly ran a quick thermal sweep, finding nothing but a few rodents and a blotch of heat from the sauna, which was probably on a timer.

Holly consulted her visor for the sensor's exact location. It was twelve feet underwater, tucked below a rocky ledge.

Underwater. Of course.

She stowed her wings, midair, then plunged feetfirst into the Baltic Sea, corkscrewing to minimize the splash. Not that there were any humans close enough to hear. The sauna and restaurant did not open until eight, and the nearest fishermen were on the mainland, their rods swaying gently like rows of bare flagpoles.

Holly vented the gas bags in her helmet to reduce buoyancy, and sank below the waves. Her visor informed her that the water temperature was a little over ten degrees, but the Shimmer Suit insulated her from cold shock and even flexed to compensate for the slight pressure increase.

“Use the Critters,” said Foaly, his voice crystal clear through the vibration nodes over her ears.

“Get out of my head, centaur.”

“Go on. Use the Critters.”

“I don’t need a tracer. It’s right there.”

Foaly sighed. “Then they shall die unfulfilled.”

The Coded Radiation Tracers were microorganisms bathed in radiation of the same frequency as the object being located. If you knew what you were looking for before leaving Foaly’s workshop, then the Critters would bring you right to it; though they were a little redundant when the sensor was a few feet away and beeping on your screen.

“Okay,” moaned Holly. “I wish you would stop using me as a guinea pig.”

She pulled back a watertight flap on her glove, releasing a cloud of glowing orange mites into the water. They bunched for a moment, then sped off in a ragged arrow toward the sensor.

“They swim, they fly, they burrow,” said Foaly, awed by his own achievement. “God bless their tiny hearts.”

The Critters left a glowing orange wake for Holly to follow. She pulled herself below a sharp ledge, to find the Critters already excavating the growths covering the sensor.

“Now, come on. That is handy. Tell me that’s not useful to a field officer.”

It was very useful, especially since Holly only had ten minutes of air left; but Foaly’s head was big enough as it was.

“A gill helmet would have been more useful, especially since you *knew* the sensor was underwater.”

“You have more than enough air,” argued Foaly. “Especially since the Critters are clearing the surrounding area.”

The Critters ate away the rock and moss covering the sensor until it gleamed like the day it came off the assembly line. Once their mission was completed, the Critters flickered and died, dissolving in the water with a gentle fizz. Holly switched on her helmet lights and focused both beams on the alloy instrument. The sensor was the size and shape of a banana and covered with an electrolytic gel.

“The water is pretty clean, thanks to Shelly. I’m getting a decent picture.”

Holly topped up her suit buoyancy a few notches until she was at neutral, and hung in the water as still as she could.

“Well, what do you see, Foaly?”

“The same as you,” replied the centaur. “A sensor with a flashing red light. I need to take a few readings, if you wouldn’t mind touching the screen.”

Holly laid her palm on the gel so that the omnisensor on her glove could sync with the ancient instrument.

“Nine and a half minutes, Foaly, don’t forget.”

“Please,” snickered the centaur, “I could recalibrate a fleet of satellites in nine and a half minutes.”

It was probably true, thought Holly, as her helmet ran a systems check on the sensor.

“Hmm,” sighed Foaly, thirty seconds later.

“Hmm?” repeated Holly nervously. “Don’t hmm, Foaly. Dazzle me with science, but don’t hmm.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with this sensor. It is remarkably functional. Which means . . .”

“That the other three sensors are malfunctioning,” concluded Holly. “So much for your genius.”

“I did not design these sensors,” said Foaly, wounded. “They’re old Kobo gear.”

Holly shuddered, her body jerking in the water. Her old enemy Opal Kobo had been one of the People’s leading innovators, until she decided that she would prefer to pursue all criminal avenues to crown herself queen of the world instead. Now she was housed in a specially constructed isolation prison cube suspended in Atlantis, and spent her time shooting off mail to politicians, pleading for early release.

“Apologies, old friend, for doubting your wonderfulness. I suppose I should check the other sensors. Above sea level, I do hope.”

“Hmm,” said Foaly again.

“Please stop that. Surely, now that I am here, I should check the remaining sensors?”

Silence for a moment as Foaly accessed a few files, then he spoke in hitched phrases while the information opened before him. “The other sensors . . . are not the pressing issue . . . right now. What we really need to know . . . is why would Shelly be redlining on *this* sensor. Let me just see . . . if we have ever had these kind of readings before.”

Holly had no choice but to maintain contact with the sensor, legs swaying underneath her, watching the air clock on her visor run down.

“Okay,” said Foaly finally. “Two reasons for a kraken’s readings to redline. One, Shelly is having a baby kraken, which is impossible since he’s a sterile male.”

“That leaves two,” said Holly, who was certain that she would not like the second reason.

“And two. He’s shedding.”

Holly rolled her eyes in relief. “Shedding. That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Weeeeellll, it’s a little worse than it sounds.”

“What do you mean, a little?”

“Why don’t I explain as you fly away as fast as you can.”

Holly did not need to be told twice. When Foaly advised an officer to leave *before* he delivered one of his beloved lectures, then the situation was serious. She spread her arms wide, and the action was mimicked by the wings on her back.

“Engage,” she said, pointing both arms to the surface; the engines ignited and blasted her clear of the Baltic, boiling the water wake as it hung in the air. Her suit was instantly dry as moisture slipped from its nonstick material and air resistance tugged at any remaining drops. In seconds she had climbed to a few hundred feet, the anxiety in Foaly’s voice hurrying her along.

“A kraken sheds its shell once, and records show that Shelly dumped his three thousand years ago, so we presumed that was that.”

“But now?”

“Now it seems as though Shelly has lived long enough to do it again.”

“And why are we concerned about this?”

“We are concerned about this because kraken shed very explosively. The new shell has already grown, and Shelly will get rid of the old one by igniting a layer of methane cells and blasting it off.”

Holly wanted to be sure she understood what was being said. “So you’re saying that Shelly is going to light a fart?”

“No, Shelly is going to light *the* fart. He has stored enough methane to power Haven for a year. There hasn’t been a fart like this since the last dwarf tribal gathering.”

A computer representation of the explosion appeared in Holly’s visor. To most fairies the image would be little more than a blur, but LEP officers were forced to develop the double focus necessary to read their screens and watch where they were going at the same time.

When the simulation put Holly clear of the projected blast radius, she dropped her boots, swinging in a loose ascending arc to face the kraken.

“Isn’t there something we can do?”

“Besides take a couple of pictures? Nope. Too late for that. Only a few minutes to go. Shelly’s inner shell is already at ignition temperature, so put your glare filter down and watch the show.”

Holly lowered her shade. “This is going to make the news all over the world. Islands don’t just explode.”

“Yes they do. Volcanic activity, gas leaks, chemical accidents. Believe me, if there’s one thing the Mud Men *do* know, it’s how to explain away an explosion. The Americans invented Area 51 just because a senator crashed a jet into a mountain.”

“The mainland is safe?”

“Should be. A little shrapnel, maybe.”

Holly relaxed, hanging from her wings. There was nothing she could do, nothing she *should* do. This was a natural process, and the kraken had every right to shed its shell.

Methane explosions. Mulch would love this.

Mulch Diggums was currently running a private investigations office in Haven with the pixie wheel-fairy Doodah Day. Mulch had, in his day, caused some methane disturbances himself.

Something pulsed gently in Holly’s visor. A plasma splotch of red in the thermal sweep windows. There was life on the island, and not just insect or rodent. Multiple humans.

“Foaly. I have something.”

Holly resized the window with a series of blink commands to track down the source. There were four hot bodies inside the sauna.

“*Inside* the sauna, Foaly. How did we miss them?”

“Their bodies were at the same temperature as the brick walls,” replied the centaur. “I’m guessing that one of the Mud Men opened the door.”

Holly magnified her visor to plus four and saw that the sauna door was open a crack, a wedge of steam pushing through the gap. The building was cooling faster than the humans, and so now they showed up separately on her scanner.

“What are those Mud Men doing here? You said nothing opens until eight.”

“I don’t know, Holly. How would I know? They’re humans. About as reliable as moon-mad demons.”

It didn’t matter *why* the humans were there, and wondering about it was a waste of time.

“I have to go back, Foaly.”

Foaly put a camera on himself, broadcasting his live image to Holly's helmet.

"Look at my face, Holly. Do you see this expression? This is my *stern* face. Do not do it, Holly. Do not return to the island. Humans die every day, and we do not interfere. The LEP *never* interferes."

"I know the rules," said Holly, muting the growling centaur.

There goes my career again, she thought, angling her wings for a steep dive.

Four men sat in the sauna's outer room, feeling very smug that they had once again outwitted island authorities and managed to sneak a free sauna before work. It did help that one of the men was Uunisaari's security guard and had access to the keys, and a little five horsepower punt that accommodated the four friends, and a bucket of Karjala beer.

"Good temperature in the sauna today," said one.

A second wiped the steam from his glasses. "A little hot, I thought. In fact, even here it feels hot underfoot."

"Go jump in the Baltic, then," said the guard, miffed at this lack of appreciation for his efforts. "That will cool down your poor toesies."

"Don't pay any attention to him," said the fourth man, fastening his watch. "He has sensitive feet. Always some temperature problem."

The men, friends since childhood, laughed and swigged their beers. The laughing and swigging ceased abruptly when a section of the roof suddenly caught fire and disintegrated.

The guard coughed out a mouthful of beer. "Was someone smoking? I said no smoking!"

Even if one of his sauna buddies had answered, the guard would not have heard, as he had somehow managed to fly through the hole in the roof.

"My toes are *really* hot," said the bespectacled man as if hanging on to old topics of conversation could make new ones go away.

The others ignored him, busy doing what men generally do in dangerous times: putting on their trousers.

There was no time for introductions or doors, so Holly drew her Neutrino sidearm and carved a six-foot hole in the roof. She was treated to the sight of four pale, semi-dressed Mud Men quivering in sudden fright.

I'm not surprised they're quivering, she thought. And that's only the beginning.

As she flew, she worked on her problem: how to get four humans out of the blast zone in as many minutes.

Until recently she would have had a second problem: the building itself. According to the fairy Book, fairies were forbidden to enter human buildings without an invitation. This was a ten-thousand-year-old hex that still had a little sting, causing nausea and loss of power to anyone who defied it. The law was an anachronism and a serious impediment to LEP operations, so after a series of public debates and a referendum, the hex had been lifted by demon warlock N^o1. It had taken the little demon five minutes to unravel a hex that had stumped elfin warlocks for centuries.

Back to the original problem. Four large humans. Big explosion imminent.

The first human was easy enough and the obvious choice. He was blocking the others and wore nothing but a towel and a tiny security guard's cap, which perched on top of his skull like a nutshell on the head of a bear.

Holly grimaced. *I have to get him out of my sight as soon as possible, or I may never forget this image. That Mud Man has more muscles than a troll.*

Troll! Of course.

There had been several additions to the Recon kit while Holly had been in Limbo, most invented and patented by Foaly, naturally. One such addition was a new clip of darts for her Neutrino. The Centaur called them anti-gravity darts, but the officers called them floaters.

The darts were based on Foaly's own Moonbelt, which generated a field around whatever was attached to it, reducing the earth's gravitational pull to one fifth of normal. The Moonbelt was useful for transporting heavy equipment. Field officers quickly adapted the belt to their own specialized needs, attaching their prisoners to the pitons, which made them much easier to handle.

Foaly had then developed a dart that had the same effect as his Moonbelt. The dart used the fugitive's own flesh to conduct the charge that rendered him almost weightless. Even a troll seems less threatening when it is bobbing in the breeze like a balloon.

Holly slipped the clip from her belt, using the heel of one hand to ram it into the Neutrino.

Darts, she thought. Back to the Stone Age.

The big security guard was square in her sights, his lip wobbling petulantly.

No need for laser sights with this Mud Man, she thought. I could hardly miss.

And she didn't. The tiny dart pricked the man's shoulder, and he quivered for a moment until the antigravity field encircled him.

"Ooh," he said. "That's a little . . ."

Then Holly landed beside him, grasped his pale thigh, and hurled him into the sky. He went faster than a popped balloon, leaving a trail of surprised O's in his wake.

The remaining men hurriedly finished pulling on their pants; two tripped in their haste, banging heads before crashing to the ground. Plates of tomato-and-mozzarella rolls were batted aside; bottles of beer went spinning across the tiles.

"My sandwiches," said one man, even as he struggled with his purple jeans.

No time for panic, thought Holly, silent and invisible among them. She ducked low, avoiding pale swinging limbs, and quickly loosed off three more darts.

A strange calm descended on the sauna as three grown men found themselves floating toward a hole in the roof.

"My feet are—" began the bespectacled man.

"Shut up about your feet!" shouted sandwich man, swiping at him with a fist. The motion sent him spinning and bouncing like a pinball.

Foaly overrode Holly's MUTE.

"D'Arvit, Holly. You have seconds. *Seconds!* Get out of there now! Even your suit armor will not stop an explosion of this magnitude."

Holly's face was red and sweating in spite of her helmet's climate control.

Seconds left. How many times have I heard that?

No time for subtleties. She lay flat on her back, tapping the readout on her Neutrino to select concussion beams, and fired a wide pattern blast straight up.

The beam bore the men aloft, as a fast-flowing river would bear bubbles, bouncing them off the walls and each other before finally popping them through the still-sparking circle in the roof.

The last man out looked down as he left, wondering absently why he was not gibbering in panic. Surely flying was grounds for hysteria?

That will probably come later, he decided. If there *is* a later for me.

In the steam of the sauna, it seemed to him that there was a small humanoid shape lying on the floor. A diminutive figure with wings, which leaped to its feet, then sped toward the flying men.

It's all true, thought the man. Just like Lord of the Rings. Fantasy creatures. All true.

Then the island exploded, and the man stopped worrying about fantasy creatures and began worrying about his trousers, which had just caught fire.

* * *

With all four men in the air, Holly decided that it was time to get herself as far from the supposed island as possible. She jumped from a squatting position, engaged her wings in the air, and shot into the morning sky.

“Very nice,” said Foaly. “You know they’re calling that move the Hollycopter, don’t you?”

Holly drew her weapon, urging the weightless men farther away from the island with short bursts.

“Busy staying alive, Foaly. Talk later.”

Foaly said. “Sorry, friend. I’m worried. I talk when I’m worried. Caballine thinks it’s a defense mechanism. Anyway, the Hollycopter. You did the same takeoff during that rooftop shoot-out in Darmstadt. Major . . . I mean . . . *Commander Kelp* caught it on video. They’re using the footage in the academy now. You wouldn’t believe how many cadets have broken their ankles trying the same trick.”

Holly was about to insist that he please shut up when Shelly ignited his methane cells, decimating his old shell and sending tons of debris hurtling skyward. The shock wave took Holly from below like a giant’s punch, sending her pinwheeling. She felt her suit flex to avoid the impact, the tiny scales closing ranks like the shields of a demon battalion. There was a slight hiss as her helmet plumped the safety bags protecting her brain and spinal cord. The screens in her visor flickered, jumped, then settled.

The world spun by her visor in a series of blues and grays. The Artificial Horizon in her helmet did several revolutions, end over end, though Holly realized that in actuality she was the one revolving, and not the display.

Alive. Still alive. My odds must be getting short.

Foaly broke in on her thoughts. “. . . heart rate is up, though I don’t know why. One would think you’d be used to these situations by now. The four humans made it, you will be delighted to know, since you risked your life and my technology to save them. What if one of my floaters had fallen into human hands?”

Holly used a combination of gestures and blinks to fire short bursts from several of her wings’ twelve engines, wrestling back control of her rig.

She opened her visor to cough and spit, then answered his accusation.

“I’m fine, thanks for asking. And all LEP equipment is fitted with remote-destruct. Even me! So the only way your precious floaters were ever going to fall into human hands was if *your* technology failed.”

“Which reminds me,” said Foaly, “I need to get rid of those darts.”

Below was pandemonium. It seemed as though half of Helsinki’s inhabitants had already

managed to launch themselves in various crafts, and a veritable flotilla was heading toward the explosion site, led by a coast guard vessel, two powerful outboards churning at its stern, nose up for speed. The kraken itself was obscured by smoke and dust, but charred fragments of its shell rained down like volcanic ash, coating the decks of the boats below and draping a dark blanket over the Baltic Sea.

Twenty yards to Holly's left, the floating men bobbed happily in the air, riding the last ripples of explosive shock, pants hanging in tattered ruins from their waists.

"I am surprised," said Holly, zooming in on the men. "No screaming or wetting themselves."

"A little drop of relaxant in the dart." Foaly chuckled. "Well, I say a little drop. Enough to have a troll missing his mommy."

"Trolls occasionally eat their mothers," commented Holly.

"Exactly."

Foaly waited until the men had dropped to within ten feet of the ocean's surface, then remote-detonated the tiny charge in each dart. Four small pops were followed by four loud splashes. The men were in the water no more than a few seconds before the coast guard reached them.

"Okay," said the centaur, obviously relieved. "Potential disaster averted, and our good deed done for the day. Kick up your boots and head back for the shuttle station. I have no doubt that Commander Kelp will want a detailed report."

"Just a second, I have mail."

"Mail! Mail! Do you really think this is the time? Your power levels are down, and the rear panels of your suit have taken a severe pasting. You need to get out of there before your shield fails altogether."

"I have to read this one, Foaly. It's important."

The mail icon flashing in Holly's visor was tagged with Artemis's signature. Artemis and Holly color-coded their mail icons. Green was social, blue was business, and red was urgent. The icon in Holly's visor pulsed a bright red. She blinked at the icon, opening the short message.

Mother dying, it read. Please come at once. Bring N°1.

Holly felt a cold dread in her stomach, and the world seemed to lurch before her eyes.

Mother dying. Bring N°1.

The situation must be desperate if Artemis was asking her to bring the powerful demon warlock.

She flashed back to the day, eighteen years ago, when her own mother had passed away. Almost two decades now, and the loss was still as painful as a raw wound. A thought struck her.

It's not eighteen years. It's twenty-one. I've been away for three.

Coral Short had been a doctor with LEPmarine, who patrolled the Atlantic, cleaning up after humans, protecting endangered species. She had been mortally injured when a particularly rancid-looking tanker they were shadowing accidentally doused their submarine with radioactive waste. Dirty radiation is poison to fairies, and it had taken her mother a week to die.

"I will make them pay," Holly had vowed, crying at her mother's bedside in Haven Clinic. "I will hunt down every last one of those Mud Men."

"No," her mother had said with surprising force. "I spent my career *saving* creatures. You must do the same. Destruction cannot be my legacy."

It was one of the last things she would ever say. Three days later, Holly stood stone-faced at her

mother's recycling ceremony, her green dress uniform buttoned to the chin, the omnitool that her mother had given her as a graduation present in its holster on her belt.

Saving creatures. So Holly applied to Recon.

And now Artemis's mother was dying. Holly realized that she didn't think of Artemis as a human anymore, just as a friend.

"I need to go to Ireland," she said.

Foaly did not bother to argue, as he had sneaked a peek at this *urgent* mail on Holly's screen.

"Go. I can cover for you here for a few hours. I could say you're completing the Ritual. As it happens, there's a full moon tonight and we still have a few magical sites near Dublin. I'll send a message to Section Eight. Maybe Qwan will let N^o1 out of the magi-lab for a few hours."

"Thanks, old friend."

"You're welcome. Now go. I'm going to get out of your head for a while and monitor the chatter here. Maybe I can plant a few ideas in the human media. I like the idea of an underground natural gas pocket. It's almost the truth."

Almost the truth.

Holly couldn't help applying the phrase to Artemis's mail. So often the Irish boy manipulated people by telling them *almost the truth*.

She chided herself silently. Surely not. Even Artemis Fowl would not lie about something this serious.

Everyone had their limits.

Didn't they?

ECHOES OF MAGIC

Artemis senior assembled his troops in Fowl Manor's conference room, which had originally been a banqueting hall. Until recently the soaring Gothic arches had been hidden by a false ceiling, but Angeline Fowl had ordered the ceiling to be removed and the hall restored to its original double-height glory.

Artemis, his father, and Butler sat in black leather Marcel Breuer chairs around a glass-topped table with space for ten more people.

Not so long ago there were smugglers seated at this table, thought Artemis. Not to mention crime lords, hackers, insider traders, counterfeiters, black marketers, and cat burglars. The old family businesses.

Artemis Senior closed his laptop. He was pale and obviously exhausted, but the old determination shone brightly in his eyes.

"The plan is a simple one. We must seek out not just a second opinion, but as many opinions as possible. Butler will take the jet and go to China. No time for official channels, so perhaps you could find a strip where immigration is a little lax."

Butler nodded. "I know just the place. I can be there and back in two days, all going well."

Artemis Senior was satisfied. "Good. The jet is fueled and ready. I have already organized a full crew and an extra pilot."

"I just need to pack a few things, then I can be on my way."

Artemis could imagine what kinds of things Butler would pack, especially if there were no officials at the airstrip.

"What will you do, Father?" he asked.

"I am going to England," said Artemis Senior. "I can take the helicopter to London City Airport, and from there a limousine to Harley Street. There are several specialists I can talk to, and it will be far more efficient to send *me* there than to bring *them* all here. If any can shed even the most feeble ray of light on your mother's situation, then I will pay them whatever it takes to get them back here. Buy out their practices, if necessary."

Artemis nodded. Wise tactics. Still, he would expect no less from the man who had successfully run a criminal empire for more than two decades, and a humanitarian one for the past few years.

Everything Artemis Senior did now was ethical, from his fair-trade clothes company to his shares in Earth-power, a consortium of like-minded businessmen who were building everything from

renewable fuel cars to geothermal rods and solar panels. He had even had the Fowl cars, jet, and helicopter fitted with advanced emission filters to lighten the family's carbon footprint.

"I shall remain here," announced Artemis, without waiting to be told. "I can coordinate your efforts, set up a Webcam so that the Harley Street specialists can see Mother, supervise Dr. Schalke and Miss Book, and also conduct my own Internet search for possible cures."

Artemis Senior half smiled. "Exactly, son. I hadn't thought of the Webcam."

Butler was anxious to leave, but he had a point to make before going. "I am not comfortable with Artemis being left alone. A genius he may be, but he is still a habitual meddler and a magnet for trouble." The bodyguard winked at Artemis. "No offense, young sir, but you could turn a Sunday picnic into an international incident."

Artemis accepted the accusation graciously. "None taken."

"That thought has occurred to me," said Artemis Senior, scratching his chin. "But there is nothing for it. The nanny has agreed to take the twins to her cottage in Howth for a couple of days, but Arty is needed here, and so he will have to fend for himself."

"Which will not be a problem," said Artemis. "Have a little faith, please."

Artemis Senior reached across the table, covering his son's hand with his own. "Faith in each other is all we have now. We have to believe that saving your mother is possible. Do you believe it?"

Artemis noticed one of the upper windows swinging slowly ajar. A leaf curled into the room, riding a swirling breeze, then the window seemed to close itself.

"I absolutely believe it, Father. More with every minute."

Holly did not reveal herself until Artemis Senior's modified Sikorsky S-76C had lifted off from the rooftop heliport. Artemis was busy rigging a Webcam at the foot of his mother's bed when the elf shimmered into view with her hand on his shoulder.

"Artemis, I am so sorry," she said softly.

"Thanks for coming, Holly," said Artemis. "You got here quickly."

"I was aboveground, in Finland, chasing a kraken."

"Ah yes, Tennyson's beast," said Artemis, closing his eyes and remembering a few lines from the famous poem.

*"Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep,
The Kraken sleepeth."*

"Sleepeth? Not anymore. Watch the news headlines later. There was a natural gas explosion, apparently."

"I would guess that Foaly is up to his old spin-doctoring tricks?"

"Yes."

"Not many kraken left now," commented Artemis. "Seven, by my reckoning."

"Seven?" said Holly, surprised. "We're only tracking six."

"Ah, yes, six. I meant six. New suit?" he asked, changing the subject a little too quickly.

"Three years more advanced than the last one," replied Holly, filing the kraken tidbit for

investigation at a later time. “It has autoarmor. If the sensors feel something big coming, the entire suit flexes to cushion the blow. It saved my life once today already.”

A message icon beeped in Holly’s helmet, and she took a moment to read the short text.

“Nº1 is on the way. They’re sending the Section Eight shuttle. No way to contain this now, so whatever we need to do has to be done fast.”

“Good. I need all the help I can get.”

Their conversation petered out as Angeline Fowl’s deathly illness completely occupied their thoughts. She radiated pallor, and the smell of lilies hung yellow in the air.

Artemis fumbled the Webcam and it rolled under the bed.

“Hellfire,” he swore, kneeling to reach an arm into the dark space. “I can’t . . . I just can’t . . .”

And suddenly the enormity of the situation struck him hard.

“What kind of son am I?” he whispered. “A liar and a thief. All my mother has ever done was love me and try to protect me, and now she may die.”

Holly helped Artemis to his feet. “You’re not that person anymore, Artemis, and you love your mother, don’t you?”

Artemis huffed, embarrassed. “Yes. Of course.”

“Then you are a good son. And your mother will see that as soon as I cure her.”

Holly clicked her neck, and magical sparks leaped from her fingertips, spinning in an inverted cone.

“No,” blurted Artemis. “Wouldn’t it be wise to check the symptoms first?”

Holly closed her fist, smothering the sparks. Suspicious.

She took off her helmet and stepped close to Artemis, closer than he liked people to be, staring hard into his mismatched eyes. It was strange to see her own eye looking back at her.

“Have you done something, Artemis?”

Artemis met her gaze steadily. It seemed that there was nothing in his eyes but sadness.

“No. I am more cautious with my mother than I would be with myself, that is all.”

Holly’s suspicion was born of years of experience with Artemis, and so she wondered why he would be reluctant to allow her to use magic now, when it had never bothered him before. Perhaps he had already tried this route himself. Perhaps the time stream had not stripped him of his stolen magic, as he had claimed.

She clamped her hands to the side of Artemis’s head, then laid her forehead against his.

“Stop this, Holly,” objected Artemis. “We have no time.”

Holly did not answer, closing her eyes, concentrating. Artemis felt heat spread across his skull and the familiar buzz of magic. Holly was probing him. It lasted barely a second.

“Nothing,” she said, releasing him. “Echoes of magic. But no power.”

Artemis stumbled backward, dizzy.

“I understand your suspicion, Holly. I have earned it repeatedly. Now, would you please examine my mother.”

Holly realized that up to this point she had avoided doing anything more than take a cursory glance at Angeline Fowl. This entire situation brought back too many painful memories.

“Of course, Artemis. I’m sorry about the probe. I had to be sure that I could take all of this on

face value.”

“My feelings are not important,” said Artemis, leading Holly by the elbow. “Now, my mother. Please.”

Holly had to force herself to properly examine Angeline Fowl, and the moment she did, a deep-rooted dread sent pins and needles fluttering up and down her limbs.

“I know this,” she whispered. “I know it.”

“This condition is familiar to you?” asked Artemis.

His mother’s face and arms were coated with a clear gel, which oozed from her pores and then steamed away. Angeline’s eyes were wide, but only the whites were visible, and her fingers clutched the sheets as though hanging on to life.

Holly took a medi-kit from her belt, placed it on the bedside table, and used a swab to take a sample of the gel. “This gel. That smell. It can’t be. It can’t.”

“It can’t be what?” asked Artemis, his fingers tight on her forearm.

Holly ignored him, slipping her helmet on and opening a channel to Police Plaza.

“Foaly? Are you there?”

The centaur responded on the second buzz. “Right here, Holly. Chained to the desk. Commander Kelp has sent me a couple of mails asking where you are. I fobbed him off with the Ritual story. I reckon you have about—”

Holly interrupted his chatter. “Foaly, listen to me.

Artemis’s mother. I think we have something . . . I think it’s bad.”

The centaur’s mood changed instantly. Holly suspected that he had been waffling to hide his anxiety. After all, Artemis’s message had been very grim.

“Okay. I’ll sync with the manor systems. Ask Artemis for his password.”

Holly lifted her visor to look Artemis in the eye. “Foaly wants your security password.”

“Of course, of course.” Artemis was drifting, and it took him a moment to remember his own secret word. “It’s CENTAUR. All caps.”

Below the earth’s crust, Foaly stored the compliment in the corner of his brain that held treasured memories. He would take that one out later and gloat over a glass of sim-wine.

“Centaur. Right. I’m in.”

A large plasma television on the wall flickered on, and Foaly’s face appeared, first in blurred bubbles, then sharp focus. The Webcam in Artemis’s hand whirred as the centaur remotely fiddled with its focus motor.

“The more points of view the better, eh?” he said, his voice pulsing from the television speakers in surround sound.

Artemis held the camera before his mother’s face, his arm as still as possible.

“I take it, from Holly’s reaction, that this condition *is* familiar to you?”

Holly pointed to the sheen covering Angeline’s face. “See the gel, Foaly, from the pores. And the smell of lilies too—there can’t be any doubt.”

“It’s impossible,” muttered the centaur. “We eradicated this years ago.”

Artemis was growing weary of these vague references.

“*What* is impossible? Eradicated *what*?”

“No diagnosis just yet, Artemis; it would be premature. Holly, I need to run a scan.”

Holly positioned the palm of her hand over Angeline Fowl’s forehead, and the omnisensor in her glove bathed Artemis’s mother with a matrix of lasers.

Foaly’s finger swished like a metronome as the information was fed to his system. It was an unconscious movement that seemed too jolly for the situation.

“Okay,” he said after half a minute. “I have what I need.”

Holly closed her fist on the sensor, then stood with Artemis, clasping his hand in hers, silently awaiting the results. It did not take long, especially when Foaly had a good idea of his search parameters.

His face was grim as he read the results. “The computer has analyzed the gel. I am afraid it’s *Spelltropy*.”

Artemis noticed Holly’s grip tightening. Whatever this *Spelltropy* was, it was bad.

He broke free from Holly, striding to the wall-mounted television. “I need an explanation, Foaly. Now, please.”

Foaly sighed, then nodded. “Very well, Artemis.

Spelltropy was a plague among the Fairy People. Once contracted it was invariably fatal, and progressed to terminal stages in three months. From that point the patient has less than a week. This disease has everything: Neurotoxins, cell destruction, resistance to all conventional therapies, incredibly aggressive. It’s amazing, really.”

Artemis’s teeth were clenched. “That’s fabulous, Foaly. At last, something even you can admire.”

Foaly wiped a bead of sweat from his nose, pausing before he spoke. “There is no cure, Artemis. Not anymore. I’m afraid your mother is dying. Judging by the concentration in the gel, I would say she has twenty-four hours, thirty-six if she fights. If it’s any consolation, she won’t suffer at the end.”

Holly crossed the room, reaching up to grasp Artemis’s shoulder, noticing how tall her human friend was becoming.

“Artemis, there are things we can do to make her comfortable.”

Artemis shrugged her off, almost violently. “No. I can achieve wonders. I have talents. Information is my weapon.” He returned his attention to the screen. “Foaly, forgive my outburst. I am myself now. You said that this *Spelltropy* was a plague—where did it begin?”

“Magic,” said Foaly simply, then elaborated. “Magic is fueled by the earth, and when the earth could no longer absorb the sheer bulk of pollutants, the magic became tainted also. *Spelltropy* first appeared about twenty years ago in Linfen, China.”

Artemis nodded. It made sense. Linfen was infamous for its high pollution levels. As the center of China’s coal industry, the city’s air was laden with fly ash, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, arsenic, and lead. There was a joke among Chinese employers: If you hold a grudge against an employee, send him to work in Linfen.

“It is passed on through magic, and thus is completely impervious to magic. In ten years it had almost decimated the fairy population. We lost twenty-five percent of our numbers. Atlantis was worst hit.”

“But you stopped it,” Artemis insisted. “You must have found a cure.”

“Not me,” said Foaly. “Our old friend Opal Koboï found the antidote. It took her ten years, then she tried to charge through the nose for it. We had to get a court order to confiscate the supply of antidote.”

Artemis was growing impatient. “I don’t care about the politics, Foaly. I want to know what the cure was, and why we can’t administer it to my mother.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Abbreviate,” snapped Artemis.

Foaly’s eyes dipped, unable to meet Artemis’s. “The cure occurred naturally. Many creatures contain important pharmacopoeia and act as natural magic enhancers. But because of human activities, more than twenty thousand of these potentially lifesaving species are made extinct every year. Opal developed a simple syringe gun to extract the cure for Spelltropy without killing the donor animal.”

Artemis suddenly realized why Foaly couldn’t look him in the eye. He cradled his head in his hands.

“Oh no. Don’t say it.”

“Opal Koboi found the antidote in the brain fluid of the silky sifaka lemur of Madagascar.”

“I always knew,” moaned Artemis, “that this would come back.”

“Unfortunately, the silky sifaka is now extinct. The last one died almost eight years ago.”

Artemis’s eyes were haunted by guilt.

“I know,” he whispered. “I killed it.”

MONKEY'S UNCLE

Fowl Manor, Almost Eight Years Ago

Ten-year-old Artemis Fowl closed the file he was working on, put his monitor to sleep, then rose from his study desk. His father would arrive momentarily for their meeting. Artemis Senior had confirmed the appointment that morning by internal mail, and he was never late. His time was precious, and he expected his son to be ready for their morning talk. Artemis's father arrived promptly at ten, leather greatcoat swishing around his knees.

"Minus fifteen in Murmansk," he explained, formally shaking his son's hand.

Artemis was standing on a specific flagstone before the fireplace. He was not actually required to stand in this spot, but he knew his father would sit in the Louis XV chair by the hearth, and Artemis Senior did not like to crane his neck as he spoke.

His father lowered himself into the period chair, and Artemis enjoyed a quiet moment of satisfaction.

"The ship is ready, I take it?"

"Ready to sail," said his father, excitement flashing in his blue eyes. "This is a new market, Arty, my boy. Moscow is already one of the most commercial cities in the world. Northern Russia will inevitably follow."

"I gather Mother is not very pleased with your latest venture."

Recently, Artemis's parents had been arguing late into the night. The conflict in their otherwise happy marriage was over Artemis Senior's business interests. He controlled a criminal empire that had tentacles from the silver mines of Alaska to the shipyards of New Zealand. Angeline was a dedicated conservationist and humanitarian, and believed that Artemis Senior's criminal activities and ruthless exploitation of natural resources set a terrible example for her son.

"He will grow up just like his father," Artemis had heard her say one evening, through a little radio bug he'd planted in the aquarium.

"I thought you loved his father."

Artemis heard a rustling of material as his parents embraced. "I do. I love you more than life. But I love this planet too."

"My love," said Artemis Senior, so gently that it was difficult for the bug to pick up his voice. "The Fowl finances are in a delicate state right now. What capital we have is locked up in illegal ventures. I need one big deal so that I can begin the transition to completely legitimate businesses.

Once we have some blue chip stock under our belts, then we can save the world.”

Artemis heard his mother kiss his father. “Very well, my pirate prince. One big deal, then we save the world.”

One big deal. A shipload of tax-free cola for the Russians. But more important, a pipeline of trade into the Arctic. Artemis suspected that his father would find it hard to abandon this pipeline after a single deal. There were billions to be made.

“The *Fowl Star* is fully loaded and ready for her voyage,” Artemis’s father informed his son later during their scheduled meeting in his study. “Remember, the world cannot be saved with good intentions alone. Leverage is needed, and gold is leverage.”

Artemis Senior pointed to the Fowl crest and motto, carved into a wooden shield above the fireplace.

“*Aurum est potestas*. Gold is power; never forget that, Arty. Until the greens have wealth behind them, no one will listen.”

Young Artemis was torn between his parents. His father embodied everything the family stood for. The Fowl dynasty had flourished for centuries because of their dedication to wealth, and Artemis had no doubt that his father would find a way first to increase their fortunes and then turn his attention to the environment. He loved his mother, but the Fowls’ finances must be saved.

“Someday, control of the family business will fall to you,” Artemis Senior told his son, standing to button his greatcoat. “And when that day comes, I will rest easy because I know you will put the Fowls first.”

“Absolutely, father,” said Artemis. “Fowls first. But that day will not come for decades.”

Artemis Senior laughed. “Let’s hope not, son. Now, I must be off; look after your mother while I am gone. And don’t let her squander the family fortune, eh?”

The words were said in a lighthearted way, but a week later Artemis Fowl Senior was missing, presumed dead, and those words became the code his son would live by.

Look after your mother, but don’t let her squander the family fortune.

Two months later, and Artemis was back at his desk, staring at the computer display in his study. On screen were the gloomy details of the family finances, which had dwindled rapidly since the disappearance of his father. He was the man of the house now, custodian of the Fowl empire, and must behave as such.

No sooner had Artemis Senior’s ship been claimed by the black Arctic waters than his debtors unanimously defaulted, and his cells of forgers, musclemen, thieves, and smugglers allied themselves to other organizations.

Honor among thieves? reflected Artemis bitterly. I think not.

Most of the Fowl money simply disappeared overnight, and Artemis was left with an estate to run and a mother who was heading rapidly toward a nervous breakdown.

It hadn’t been long before the creditors were closing in, eager to claim their slice of the pie before only crumbs were left. Artemis had been forced to auction a Rembrandt sketch just to pay the mortgage on the manor and settle various other debts.

Mother was not making things any easier. She refused to believe that Artemis Senior was missing and forged ahead with her mission to save the world, hang the expense.

Artemis, meanwhile, was trying to mount expeditions to find his father. This is difficult when you are ten years old and not taken seriously by the adult world in general, in spite of various international art and music prizes, not to mention more than a dozen lucrative patents and copyrights filed worldwide. In time Artemis would build a fortune of his own, but *in time* was not soon enough. Money was needed now.

Artemis wanted to put together a proper situation room to monitor the Internet and world news channels.

That would take twenty computers at least. Also there was the team of Arctic explorers waiting in their Moscow hotel for him to wire the next portion of their payment. A payment that he didn't have.

Artemis tapped the screen with an elegant finger.

Something must be done, he thought.

Angeline Fowl was crying on her bed when Artemis entered the bedroom. His heart lurched at the sight, but he clenched his fist and told himself to be strong.

"Mother," he said, waving a bank account statement. "What is this?"

Angeline dried her eyes on a handkerchief, then rose to her elbows, slowly focusing on her son.

"Arty, little Arty. Come and sit with me."

Angeline's eyes were ringed with black mascara tears, and her complexion had faded to a white that was almost translucent.

Be strong.

"No, Mother. No sitting and talking. I want you to explain this fifty thousand euro check to a wildlife center in South Africa."

Angeline was bewildered. "South Africa, darling? Who's gone to South Africa?"

"You sent a check for fifty thousand euros to South Africa, Mother. I had that money put aside for the Arctic expedition."

"Fifty thousand. That figure is familiar. I'll ask your father when he gets in. He had better not be late for dinner again today, or I'll—"

Artemis lost his patience. "Mother, please. Try to think. We do not have spare funds for South African charities. All the staff have been let go except Butler, and he hasn't been paid in a month."

"Lemur!" shouted Angeline triumphantly. "I remember now. I bought a silky sifaka lemur."

"Impossible," snapped Artemis. "The *Propithecus candidus* is extinct."

His mother was suddenly passionate. "No. No, they found little silky in South Africa. They don't know how it managed to get there from Madagascar, probably on a poacher's boat. So I had to save it. It's the last one, Arty."

"In a year or two it will die," said Artemis coldly. "Then our money will have been wasted."

Angeline was horrified. "You sound just like . . ."

"Father? Good. Someone has to be rational."

Artemis's face was stern, but inside he quailed. How could he speak to his mother like this, when she was literally driven demented by grief?

Why have I not fallen to pieces? he wondered, and the answer came to him quickly. *I am a Fowl, and Fowls have always triumphed in the face of adversity.*

"But fifty thousand, Mother? For a lemur?"

“They may find a female,” argued Angeline. “Then we will have saved a species.”

There is no point in arguing, thought Artemis. Logic cannot prevail here.

“And where is lucky silky now?” he asked innocently, smiling as a ten-year-old should when discussing a small furry animal.

“He is safe in Rathdown Park. Living like a king. Tomorrow he is being flown to a special artificial habitat in Florida.”

Artemis nodded. Rathdown Park was a privately funded nature reserve in Wicklow, specially constructed to protect endangered species. It had tighter security than the average Swiss bank.

“That’s wonderful. Perhaps I will visit the fifty-thousand-euro monkey.”

“Now, now, Artemis,” his mother chided. “Silky is a lemur; they predate monkeys, as you well know.”

I know but do not care! Artemis wanted to scream. *Father is missing, and you have spent the expedition money on a lemur!*

But he held his tongue. Mother was delicate at the moment, and he did not want to contribute to her instability.

“Rathdown doesn’t usually accept visitors,” continued Angeline. “But I am sure if I made a call they would make an exception for you; after all, the Fowls did pay for the primate village.”

Artemis appeared delighted. “Thank you, Mother. That would be a real treat for me, and Butler too. You know how he likes small furry creatures. I would love to see the species we have saved.”

Angeline smiled with a degree of madness that scared her son terribly.

“Well done, Artemis. This is one in the eye for the big-business men. Mother and son, united we shall save the world. I shall tease your father terribly when he gets home.”

Artemis backed slowly toward the door, his heart in his shoes.

“Yes, Mother. United we shall save the world.”

Once the door had closed behind him, Artemis stepped briskly downstairs, fingers conducting imaginary music as he plotted. He detoured to his bedroom and quickly dressed for a trip, then continued to the kitchen, where he found Butler slicing vegetables with a Japanese kodachi short sword. He was now chef and gardener as well as protector.

The huge bodyguard was making quick work of a cucumber.

“A summer salad,” he explained. “Just greens, hardboiled egg, and some chicken. I thought crème brûlée for dessert. It will give me a chance to try out my flamethrower.” He glanced across at Artemis and was surprised to see him dressed in one of his two suits, the dark blue one he had worn recently to the opera in Covent Garden. Artemis had always been a neat dresser, but a suit and tie were unusual even for him.

“Are we going somewhere formal, Artemis?”

“Nowhere formal,” said Artemis, with a coldness in his tone that the bodyguard had not heard before but would come to know well. “Just business. I am in charge of the family affairs now, and so I should dress accordingly.”

“Ah . . . I detect a distinct echo of your father.” Butler wiped the sword carefully, then pulled off his apron. “We have some typical Fowl family business to conduct, do we?”

“Yes,” replied Artemis. “With a monkey’s uncle.”

Present Day

Holly was aghast.

“So in a fit of childish pique you murdered the lemur.”

Artemis had composed himself and sat at a bedside chair, holding his mother’s hand gently, as though it were a bird.

“No. I used to suffer from the occasional fit of pique, as you well know, but they generally did not last. An intellect such as mine cannot be overpowered by emotions for long.”

“But you said that you killed the animal.”

Artemis rubbed his temple. “Yes, I did. I didn’t wield the knife, but I killed it, make no mistake.”

“How exactly?”

“I was young . . . younger,” mumbled Artemis, uncomfortable with the topic. “A different person in many ways.”

“We know what you were like, Artemis,” said Foaly in a rueful tone. “You have no idea how much of my budget the Fowl Manor siege ate up.”

Holly pressed for an answer. “How did you kill the lemur? How did you even get hold of it?”

“It was ridiculously easy,” admitted Artemis. “Butler and I visited Rathdown Park and simply disabled the security while we were there. Later that evening we both popped back and picked up the lemur.”

“So Butler killed it. I am surprised; it’s not his style.”

Artemis’s eyes were downcast. “No, Butler didn’t do it. I sold the lemur to a group called the Extinctionists.”

Holly was horrified. “Extinctionists! Artemis, you didn’t. That’s horrible.”

“It was my first big deal,” said Artemis. “I delivered it to them in Morocco and they paid me a hundred thousand euros. It funded the entire Arctic expedition.”

Holly and Foaly were speechless. Artemis had effectively put a price on life. Holly backed away from the human she had only moments ago considered a friend.

“I rationalized the whole thing. My father for a lemur. How could I not go through with it?”

Artemis had real regret in his eyes. “I know. It was a terrible thing to do. If I could turn back the clock . . .”

And suddenly he stopped. *He* couldn’t turn back the clock, but he knew a demon warlock who could. It was a chance. *A chance.*

He laid his mother’s hand gently on the bed, then stood to pace.

Plotting music, he thought. I need plotting music.

He selected Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 from his vast selection of mental music and listened to it as he thought.

Good choice. Somber yet uplifting. Inspiring stuff.

Artemis paced the carpet, almost unaware of his surroundings, lost in ideas and possibilities.

Holly recognized this mood.

“He has a plan,” she said to Foaly.

The centaur pulled a long face, which wasn’t difficult. “Why am I not surprised?”

Holly took advantage of Artemis’s distraction to seal her helmet and speak privately to Foaly.

She walked to the window and peered out at the estate through a gap in the curtains. The sinking sun wavered behind tree branches, and clumps of dahlias flashed red and white like fireworks.

Holly allowed herself time for a sigh, then focused on the situation.

“There’s more at stake here than Artemis’s mother,” she said.

Foaly switched off the television so that Artemis could not hear him.

“I know. If there is an outbreak, it could be a disaster for fairies. We don’t have any antidote left, remember?”

“We need to interview Opal Kobi. She must have kept records somewhere.”

“Opal always kept her most valuable formulae in her head. I think she was caught off guard by the jungle fire; she lost all her donors in one fell swoop.”

Kobi Industries had attracted the Madagascan lemurs by setting a sonix box in the Tsingy of Bemaraha. Virtually every lemur on the island had responded to the box’s call, and they had all been wiped out by an unfortunate lightning fire. Luckily, the fairies had already treated most of their infected, but fifteen more fairies had died in quarantine wards.

Artemis stopped pacing and cleared his throat loudly. He was ready to share his plan, and he wanted the fairies’ complete attention.

“There is a relatively simple solution to our problem,” he said.

Foaly reactivated the television, his face filling the flat screen.

“*Our* problem?”

“Come, Foaly, don’t pretend to be obtuse. This is a fairy plague that has mutated and spread to humans. You have no antidote and no time to synthesize one. Who knows how many cases of Spelltropy are incubating right now?”

Including my own, thought Artemis. I used magic on my mother, so therefore I probably have the disease.

“We will quarantine the manor,” responded Foaly. “So long as no one uses magic on your mother, we can contain this.”

“I seriously doubt that my mother is patient zero. That is simply too much of a coincidence. There are other cases out there, who knows how far along.”

Foaly grunted, his version of conceding a point. “So tell me, Artemis, what is this *relatively simple solution*?”

“I go back in time and save the lemur,” said Artemis, smiling brightly as though he had suggested a pleasant summer dip.

Silence. Complete silence for several moments, broken eventually by a strangled whinny from Foaly.

“Go back ...”

“. . . in time,” completed Holly incredulously.

Artemis sat in a comfortable armchair, steepled his fingers, and nodded once.

“Present your arguments, please. I am ready.”

“How can you be so smug?” wondered Holly. “After all the tragedy we have seen, after all the havoc your plans have wreaked.”

“I am determined, not smug,” corrected Artemis. “There is no time for prudence here. My mother has hours left, and the Fairy People don’t have much more.”

Foaly was still gaping. “Do you have any idea how many constitution committee meetings we would have to sit through just to allow us to bring this issue to a Council meeting?”

Artemis wagged a finger dismissively. “Irrelevant. I have read the People’s constitution. It does not govern humans or demons. If N^o1 decides to help me, technically you have no legal power to stop him.”

Holly joined the discussion. “Artemis, this is lunacy. Time travel was outlawed for a reason. The potential repercussions for the slightest interference could be catastrophic.”

Artemis smiled mirthlessly. “Ah yes, the trusty *time paradox*. If I go back in time and kill my grandfather, then shall I cease to exist? I believe, as Gorben and Berndt did, that any repercussions are already being felt. We can only change the future, not the past or present. If I go back, then I have already been back.”

Holly spoke kindly; she felt sorry for Artemis. Angeline’s illness reminded her painfully of her own mother’s final days.

“We cannot interfere, Artemis. Humans must be allowed to live their lives.”

Artemis knew that to ram home his next argument he should stand and theatrically deliver the accusation, but he could not. He was about to play the cruelest trick of his life on one of his closest friends, and the guilt was almost unbearable.

“You have already interfered, Holly,” he said, forcing himself to meet her eyes.

The words made Holly shiver; she buzzed up her visor. “What do you mean?”

“You healed my mother. Healed her and damned her.”

Holly took a step back, raising her palms as though to ward off blows.

“Me? I . . . What are you saying?”

Artemis was committed to the lie now, and covered his guilt with a sudden burst of anger.

“You healed my mother after the siege. *You* must have given her Spelltrophy.”

Foaly came to his friend’s defense. “Not possible, that healing was years ago. Spelltrophy has a three-month incubation period, and it never varies by more than a few days.”

“And it *never* affects humans,” Artemis countered. “This is a new strain. You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Holly’s face was slack with shock and guilt. She believed Artemis’s words, though Artemis himself knew that he must have given his mother the disease when he adjusted her memory.

Father must have it too. Who gave it to me? And why am I not sick?

There were so many puzzles, but now was not the time to unravel them. *Now* he needed to find the antidote, and to ensure fairy aid, he must play on their supposed guilt in this matter.

“But I’m clean,” protested Holly. “I was tested.”

“Then you must be a carrier,” said Artemis flatly. He turned his gaze on the centaur’s image. “That’s possible, isn’t it?”

Foaly was taken aback by Artemis’s bluntness. “If this truly is a new strain, then yes, it’s possible,” he admitted. “But you can’t draw any conclusions from supposition . . .”

“Normally I would agree. *Normally* I would have the luxuries of time and objectivity. But my mother is dying, and so I have neither. I must go back to save the lemur, and you are honorbound to help me, and if you won’t help, then at least you must promise not to hinder my efforts.”

The fairies were silent. Holly was lost in thought about what she might have done. Foaly was

racking his considerable brain for responses to Artemis's arguments. He found none.

Holly removed her helmet and walked awkwardly to Angeline Fowl's bedside. Her legs felt strangely numb and the feeling was spreading.

"My mother died—poisoned by humans. It was an accident, but that didn't keep her alive." Tears dripped from her eyes. "I wanted to hunt those men down. I hated them." Holly wrung her hands. "I'm sorry, Artemis. I didn't know. How many others have I infected? You must hate me."

Take it back, thought Artemis. *Tell the truth now or your friendship can never be the same.* Then, *No. Be strong. Mother must live.*

"I don't hate you, Holly," said Artemis softly. *I hate myself, but the deception must continue.* "Of course none of this is your fault, but you *must* let me go back."

Holly nodded, then wiped her brimming eyes. "I will do more than let you go, I will escort you. A sharp pair of eyes and a quick gun hand will prove useful."

"No, no, no," shouted Foaly, increasing the screen's volume with each negative. "We can't simply alter the past whenever we feel like it. Perhaps Holly should save her mother, or bring Commander Julius Root back from the dead! This is totally unacceptable."

Artemis pointed a finger at him. "This is a unique situation," he said. "You have a plague about to erupt, and we can stop it here. Not only that, but you can reintroduce a species that was thought to be extinct. I may have caused one lemur to die, but Opal Koboï gathered the rest together for the lightning fire. The People are as guilty as I am. You harvested a living creature's brain fluid to save yourselves."

"We . . . we were desperate," argued Foaly, horrified that he would actually stutter.

"Exactly," said Artemis triumphantly. "You were willing to do anything. Remember how *that* felt, and ask yourself if you want to go through it again."

Foaly dropped his gaze, thinking back. That time had been a waking nightmare for the fairies. The use of magic had been suspended, and the lemurs were already extinct by the time a court order forced Opal to reveal the source of her antidote. He had worked sleeplessly to develop an alternative cure, but without success.

"We thought we were invincible. The only disease left was man." The centaur made up his mind. "The lemur must be alive," he stated. "The brain fluid can be stored for brief periods, but once it becomes inert, the fluid is useless. I was developing a charged container but . . ."

"This time you will succeed," Artemis assured him. "You will have a live subject and laboratory conditions. You can clone a female."

"Cloning is illegal, generally," mused Foaly. "But in extinction cases, exceptions have been made. . . ."

Holly's helmet beeped, drawing her attention to a craft landing in the driveway. She hurried to the window in time to see a slight shimmer cast a shadow on the moonlit driveway.

It must be a rookie pilot, thought Holly crossly. He hasn't activated his shadow lights.

"The shuttle's here," she informed Artemis.

"Tell the pilot to park around the back, in one of the stables. The doctor's assistant is making calls from my father's office. I don't want her going for a walk and bumping into a shielded fairy craft."

Holly relayed the instructions, and they waited tensely for the shuttle to maneuver to the back of the house. It seemed like a long wait, silent but for the rasp of Angeline's labored breathing.

“N°1 might not be able to do it,” said Foaly almost to himself. “He is a young warlock, with barely any training. Time travel is the most difficult of magics.”

Artemis did not offer a comment. There was no point. All his hopes rested on N°1.

He does it, or Mother dies.

He took Angeline’s hand, stroking the rough parchment skin with his thumb.

“Hold on, Mother,” he whispered. “I will only be a second.”

I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU

The little demon known as N^o1 cut a strange figure waddling down the LEP shuttle's gangplank. A small, stocky individual with gray armored plates and short limbs, he looked a little like a miniature upright rhino-ceros with fingers and toes, except for the head. The head was pure gargoyle.

I wish I had a tail, thought N^o1.

In actual fact he did have a tail, but it was stubby and not good for much except making snow fans in Haven City's artificial weather park.

N^o1 consoled himself with the observation that at least his tail didn't dangle down into the toilet. Some of the Hybras demons had trouble adjusting to the new-fangled seats on the recycling lounges in Haven. He had heard horror stories. Apparently there had been three emergency reattachments this month alone.

The transition from Limbo to normal time had been difficult for all demons, but there were many more positives than negatives. Restrictions imposed under the old tribal leader were now being lifted. Demons could eat cooked food if they felt like it. Family units were taking hold again. Even the most belligerent demons were a lot more relaxed with their mothers around. But it was difficult to shake off ten millennia of human-hating, and many of the buck demons were undergoing therapy or were on mood pills to stop them hopping a shuttle to the surface and chomping on the first human limb they saw.

Not N^o1, though, who had no limb-chomping ambitions whatsoever. He was something of an anomaly among demons. N^o1 loved everyone, even humans, especially Artemis Fowl, who had saved them all from the deathly dreariness of Limbo, not to mention Leon Abbot, the psychopathic ex-tribe leader.

So when the call came through to Section 8 that Artemis needed him, N^o1 had strapped himself into the division's shuttle and demanded to be taken aboveground. Commander Vinyáya had agreed because disagreeing could lead to all sorts of magical tantrums from the fledgling warlock. Once, in a fit of frustration, he had accidentally shattered the magnifying wall of the city's huge aquarium. Fairies were still finding minnows in their toilet ponds.

You can go, Vinyáya had told him. *But only if you take a squad of guards to hold your hand every step of the way.*

Which did not literally mean *hold his hand*, as N^o1 had found out when he tried to link with the captain of the guard.

“But, Commander Vinyáya said,” he had objected.

“Stow the hand, demon,” ordered the captain. “There’ll be no hand-holding on my watch.”

And so N^o1 appeared to approach Fowl Manor alone, though he was flanked by a dozen shielded fairies. Halfway up the avenue he remembered to shroud his real appearance with a shape-shifting spell. Any human who happened to be looking down the driveway would now see a small boy in flowing, flowered robes strolling toward the front door. This was an image N^o1 had seen in a human movie from the last century, and he thought it was appropriately nonthreatening.

Miss Book happened to appear at the doorway just as N^o1 reached it. The sight of him stopped the nurse-publicist in her tracks. She tugged off her glasses as though they were feeding false information to her eyes.

“Hello there, little boy,” she said, smiling, though she probably would not have been so jolly had she been aware of the twelve plasma rifles pointed at her head.

“Hi,” said N^o1 cheerily. “I love everyone, so no need to feel threatened.”

Miss Book’s smile faltered. “Threatened? Of course not. Are you looking for someone? Are you playing dress-up?”

Artemis appeared at the doorway, interrupting the conversation.

“Ah . . . Ferdinand, where have you been?” he said, quickly shepherding N^o1 past the nurse. “This is the gardener’s boy, Ferdinand,” he explained. “A dramatic type. I’ll summon his father to collect him.”

“Good idea,” said Miss Book doubtfully. “I know your mother’s room is sealed, but don’t let him upstairs all the same.”

“Of course not,” said Artemis. “I’ll send him out the back way.”

“Good,” said the nurse. “I just need a breath of fresh air, then I will come to check on your mother.”

“Take your time,” said Artemis. “I can read the instruments.”

I designed a few of them, he thought.

As soon as Miss Book disappeared around the corner, Artemis escorted his demon friend up the stairs.

“We’re going upstairs,” objected N^o1 mildly. “Didn’t that young lady tell you not to allow me upstairs?”

Artemis sighed. “How long have you known me, N^o1?”

N^o1 nodded craftily. “Ah, I see. Artemis Fowl *never* does what he is told to do.”

Holly greeted N^o1 on the landing, but refused to hug him until he dropped the shape-shifting spell.

“I hate the feel of those things,” she said. “It’s like hugging a wet sponge.”

N^o1 pouted. “But I enjoy being Ferdinand. Humans smile at me.”

Artemis assured him that there was no surveillance in his study, and so the demon warlock waited until the door was closed behind them, then banished the spell with a click of his fingers. Ferdinand unraveled and fell from N^o1’s body in a flurry of sparks, leaving the small gray demon warlock wearing nothing but a wide grin.

Holly hugged him tightly. “I knew you would come. We need you desperately.”

N^o1 stopped smiling. “Ah, yes. Artemis’s mother. Does she want a magical cure?”

“That’s the last thing she wants,” said Holly.

Once the situation was explained to N^o1, he immediately agreed to help.

“You are in luck, Artemis,” said the little demon, wiggling his eight fingers. “I did a module on time travel last week for the warlock diploma course I’m taking.”

“Small class, I bet,” commented Artemis dryly.

“Just me,” admitted N^o1. “And Qwan, of course, my teacher. Apparently I am the most powerful warlock Qwan has ever seen.”

“Good,” said Artemis. “Then transporting us all into the past shouldn’t pose any problems for you.”

Foaly had projected himself onto five of Artemis’s various monitors. “*All?*” spluttered each image. “All! You can’t take N^o1 with you.”

Artemis was not in the mood for argument. “I need him, Foaly. End of discussion.”

Foaly looked as though his head would bulge through the screens. “It is most certainly not *end of discussion*. Holly is an adult, she can make her own decision, but N^o1 is little more than a child. You cannot jeopardize him on one of your missions. A lot of hopes rest on that little demon. The future of the fairy families.”

“None of us will have a future if N^o1 doesn’t bring us to the past.”

“Please stop,” said N^o1. “All this arguing is making me dizzy. There is no time for it.”

Artemis’s face was red, but he held his tongue, unlike Foaly, who kept shouting, but at least he muted the screens.

“Foaly needs to vent,” explained Holly. “Or he gets headaches.”

The three waited until the centaur calmed himself, then N^o1 spoke. “In any event, I cannot go with you, Artemis. That’s not how it works.”

“But you transported us from Limbo.”

“Qwan did that. He is a master, I am but an apprentice. And anyway, we had no desire to go *back* to Limbo. If you wish to return *here*, I need to stay as a marker.”

“Explain,” said Artemis tersely.

N^o1 spread his arms wide. “I am a beacon,” he declared. “A shining supernova of power. Any magic I release into the ether will be attracted back to me. I send you into the past, and you will snap back to me like puppies on a leash.” N^o1 frowned, not happy with his simile. “One of those retractable leashes.”

“Yes, we get it,” said Artemis. “How long will it take to weave the spell?”

N^o1 chewed his lip for a moment. “About as long as it takes you two to remove your clothing.”

“Hurkk,” said Artemis half-choking with surprise.

“D’Arvit,” swore Holly.

“I think we all know what D’Arvit means,” said N^o1. “But *hurkk* is not English. Unless you meant *hark*, which means *to remember something from the past*. Which I suppose could be relevant. Or perhaps you were speaking Dutch, and then *hurk* would translate as *squat*.” N^o1 paused for a wink. “Which means *squat* to me.”

Artemis leaned close to the demon’s cornet-shaped ear. “Why do we need to take our clothes

off?”

“That is a very good question,” said Holly into the other ear.

“It’s quite simple,” said N^o1. “I am not so skilled as Qwan. And even *with* Qwan overseeing the last transfer, you two managed to switch an eye each, which was probably because someone was focusing on stealing magic. If you take clothes or guns in there, they could become a part of you.” The demon raised a stiff finger. “Lesson number one of time transfers,” he stated. “Keep it simple.

It’s going to take all of your concentration just to reassemble your bodies. *And* you will be thinking for the lemur too.”

N^o1 noticed both Artemis’s and Holly’s awkward expressions and took pity on them.

“I suppose you could keep one thing, if you must. A small garment, but make sure it’s your color, because you could be wearing it for a really long time.”

Though they both knew that this was no time for modesty, neither Artemis nor Holly could suppress a blush. Holly covered her embarrassment by tearing off her Shimmer Suit as quickly as possible.

“I’m keeping the one-piece,” she said belligerently, daring N^o1 to argue. The *one-piece* looked similar to a swimsuit but was padded on the shoulders and back to support a wing rig. There were also heat and kinetic panels that could absorb energy from the wearer to power the suit.

“Okay,” said N^o1. “But I would advise you to remove the pads and any other electronics.”

Holly nodded, tearing the pads from their Velcro strips.

Artemis gathered Holly’s things. “I will put your helmet and suit in the safe, just to be certain they are secure. No need to take chances with the People’s technology.”

“Now you’re thinking like a centaur,” Foaly piped up.

It took only a minute to hide the fairy gear, and when he returned from the safe room, Artemis took off his shirt and trousers carefully, hanging them in his wardrobe. He placed his loafers on a shoe rack alongside several similar black pairs, and one brown, for casual days.

“Nice underwear,” snickered Foaly from the screen, momentarily forgetting the gravity of the situation.

Artemis was wearing a pair of red Armani boxer shorts, which were pretty much the same color as his face.

“Can we get on with it?” he snapped. “Where do you need us to stand?”

“Wherever you need to be,” replied N^o1 simply. “It’s far easier for me if you take off and land at the same point. It’s hard enough shooting you down a wormhole faster than the speed of light without worrying about location too.”

“We are in the right location,” said Artemis. “This is where we need to be.”

“You need to know *when* you want to arrive,” added N^o1. “The temporal coordinates are as important as the geographical ones.”

“I know when.”

“Very well,” said N^o1, rubbing his hands together. “Time to send you on your way.”

Holly remembered something. “I haven’t completed the Ritual,” she said. “I’m low on magic, and without weapons, that could be a problem. We don’t have an acorn.”

“Not to mention a bend in the river,” added Artemis.

N^o1 smirked. “Those things *could* be problems. Unless . . .”

A spiral rune on the demon’s forehead glowed red and spun like a Catherine wheel. It was hypnotizing.

“Wow,” said Holly. “That’s really . . .”

Then a pulsing beam of crimson magic blasted from the center of the rune, enveloping Holly in a cocoon of light.

“Now you’re full to the brim,” said N^o1, bowing low. “Thank you very much. I’m here all week. Don’t forget to tip your goblins and bury those acorns.”

“Wow,” said Holly again when her fingertips stopped buzzing. “That’s a neat trick.”

“More than you know. That’s my own signature magic. The N^o1 cocktail, if you like, which makes you a beacon in the time stream.”

Artemis shuffled self-consciously. “How long do we have?”

N^o1 gazed at the ceiling while he ran some calculations. “Three hundred years . . . No, no, three days. Holly can bring you back at any point before that simply by making herself open to my power, but after three days the link grows weaker.”

“Is there anything we can do about that?”

“Let’s face facts: all-powerful I may be, but I’m a novice at this, so taking off from where you landed is vital. If you go beyond three days, then you are stuck in the past.”

“If we do get separated, couldn’t Holly come back and get me?” wondered Artemis.

“No, she could not,” said N^o1. “It would be impossible for you to meet at a point neither of you had experienced. This is a one-time deal only. It will take everything I have to hold you together for this trip. Any more and your atoms would lose their memory and simply forget where it is they are supposed to go. Both of you have already been in the time stream twice. I can transport objects forever and a day, but living beings break down without a warlock in the stream to shield them.”

Holly asked a very pertinent question. “N^o1, have you done this before?”

“Of course,” said the demon. “Several times. On a simulator. And two of the holograms survived.”

Artemis’s determination barely flickered. “Two survived. The last two?”

“No,” admitted N^o1. “The last two were trapped in a time wormhole and consumed by quantum zombies.”

Holly felt her pointy ears tingle, always a bad sign. Elfin ears could sense danger.

“Quantum zombies? You’re not serious.”

“That’s what I said to Qwan. He wrote the program.”

“This is irrelevant,” said Artemis sharply. “We have no option but to go.”

“Very well,” said N^o1, flexing his fingers. He bent his knees and rested his entire body weight on the tip of his tail.

“Power posture,” he explained. “I do some of my best work in this position.”

“So does Mulch Diggums,” muttered Foaly. “Quantum zombies. I need to get a copy of *that* program.”

A red haze blossomed around the demon warlock, tiny lightning bolts crackling across his horns.

“He’s powering up,” said Foaly from the screens. “You’ll be off any second. Remember, try not

to touch anything you don't have to. Don't talk to anyone. Don't contact me in the past. I have no desire not to exist."

Artemis nodded. "I know. Make as little impact as possible, in case the time paradox theory has some merit."

Holly was impatient to get going. "Enough science. Just blast us into the past. We'll bring the monkey back."

"Lemur," said Artemis and Foaly together.

N^o1 closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were pure crimson.

"Okay, ready to go," he said conversationally.

Artemis blinked. He was expecting N^o1's voice of power to be a bit less squeaky. "Are you sure?"

N^o1 groaned. "I know. It's the voice, isn't it. Not enough gravel. Qwan says I should go for less airy and more fairy. Trust me, I'm ready. Now hold hands."

Artemis and Holly stood there in their underwear, gingerly locking fingers. They had crossed space and time together, weathered rebellions, and tangled with demented despots. Coughed blood, lost digits, inhaled dwarf fumes, and swapped eyeballs, yet they found holding hands awkward.

N^o1 knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't resist a parting crack.

"I now pronounce you . . ."

Neither hand-holder was amused, but before they had time to do more than scowl, twin bolts of red energy crackled from N^o1's eyes, blasting his friends into the time stream.

"Man and elf," he said, finishing his joke, then chuckling delightedly.

On screen, Foaly snorted. "I'm guessing you're laughing to cover your anxiety?"

"Exactly right," said N^o1.

Where Artemis and Holly had been standing, there were flickering copies of them both, mouths open to object to N^o1's comment.

"That really freaks me out, the ghost images. It's like they're dead."

Foaly shuddered. "Don't say that. If they're dead, we all could be. How soon will they be back?"

"In about ten seconds."

"And if they're not back in ten seconds?"

"Then never."

Foaly started counting.

I TO I

There is a moment of confusion when a land animal enters the water. Beast, human, or fairy, it doesn't matter. The surface is broken and every sense is suddenly shocked. The cold stings, motion slows, and the eyes are filled with smears of color and the snap of bursting bubbles. The time stream is like that moment sustained.

That's not to say that traveling through the time stream is a consistent experience. Never the same journey twice. The demon warlock Qwan, who was the planet's most experienced time-traveling fairy, wrote in his best-selling autobiography, *Qwan: My Time Is Now*, that *riding the time stream is like flying through a dwarf's intestine. There are very nice free-flowing stretches, but then you turn a corner to find the thing backed up and putrid. The problem being that the time stream is largely an emotional construct, and it absorbs ambient feelings from the real time it flows around. If you happen across a stretch of foul-smelling gunk, you can bet that the humans are killing something.*

Artemis and Holly were being dragged through a foul-smelling stretch that corresponded with an entire ecosystem being destroyed in South America. They could sense the animals' terror and even smell the charred wood.

Artemis felt too that Holly was losing herself in the maelstrom of emotions. Fairies were so much more sensitive to their environments than humans. If Holly lost concentration, her atoms would dissipate and be absorbed by the stream.

Focus, Holly, Artemis broadcast into the stream. *Remember who you are and why we are here.*

It was difficult for them both. Their particle memory had already been weakened by the Limbo journeys, and the temptation to meld with the stream was strong.

Artemis conjured a picture of his mother in his consciousness to bolster his determination.

I know when and where I want to be, he thought. Exactly when and where . . .

Fowl Manor, Almost Eight Years Ago

Artemis and Holly exited the time stream and entered ten-year-old Artemis's study. Physically this was a gentle enough experience, like jumping from a low wall onto thick carpet, but emotionally this particular trip was like a ten-minute blitz of the worst memories of their lives. The time stream: never the same ride twice.

Holly cried for her mother for a minute, but eventually the persistent chiming of a grandfather clock reminded her of where and when she was. She stood shakily and looked around her to find

Artemis lurching toward the wardrobe. The sight of him cheered her a little.

“You have really let yourself go,” she said.

Artemis was rummaging through the clothes on the rail.

“Of course nothing will fit,” he muttered. “All too small.”

Holly elbowed past him. “Not for me,” she said, pulling a dark suit from its hanger.

“My first suit,” said Artemis fondly. “For the family Christmas postcard. I had no idea really how to wear it. I remember fidgeting throughout the fitting. It’s a Zegna, custom made.”

Holly tore off a protective polyethylene wrap. “So long as it fits.”

It was only then that Artemis’s emotions settled enough for him to register Holly’s comment.

“What do you mean, I have let myself go?”

Holly swung the wardrobe door so that its mirrored side faced Artemis.

“See for yourself,” she said.

Artemis looked. In the mirror he saw a tall, slender boy, his face all but invisible under a wild mop of shoulder-length hair and even some bristles on his chin.

“Ah. I see.”

“I’m surprised you do,” said Holly. “Through all that hair.”

“Accelerated aging. A side effect of the time stream,” Artemis hypothesized, unconcerned.

“When we return, the effects should be reversed.” He paused, catching sight of Holly’s reflection.

“Perhaps you should check *yourself* in the mirror. I am not the only one to have changed.”

Holly elbowed him aside, certain she was being kidded, but the half-smile died on her lips when she saw the fairy in the looking glass. It was her own face, but different, missing a few scars and a few decades’ wear and tear.

“I am young,” she gasped. “Younger.”

“Don’t be upset,” said Artemis briskly. “It is temporary. All this is nothing more than dress-up. My physical maturity, your youth. In a moment or two we will be back in the stream.”

But Holly *was* upset. She knew how this had happened.

I was thinking of Mother. Of our last hours together. Of how I was then.

And so that was how she had changed.

Look at me. Just out of the academy. In human terms, barely older than Artemis.

For some reason, this was a disturbing thought.

“Get some pants on,” she snapped, buttoning a crisp white shirt up to her neck. “Then we can discuss your theories.”

Artemis used his extra inches to reach up and tug a large box from the top of the wardrobe. In it were neatly folded layers of clothes, destined for one of Angeline Fowl’s charity shops.

He tossed a silver wig to Holly.

“Seventies fancy dress party,” he explained. “Mother went as a starship trooper, I seem to remember. Now cover those pointy ears.”

“A hat would be easier,” said Holly, pulling the wig over her auburn crew cut.

“No such luck, I’m afraid,” sighed Artemis, selecting an old tracksuit from the box. “This is not exactly Harrods; we will have to make do.”

Artemis’s old loafers fit Holly well enough, and there were a pair of his father’s sneakers in the

box, which stayed on his feet when the toes were stuffed.

“Always good to be dressed when you’re stealing monkeys,” said Holly.

Artemis rolled up the tracksuit sleeves. “There’s no need to dress at all, really. We simply wait for a few minutes, until my mother almost catches Butler sneaking upstairs with the lemur. I remember him sliding the cage through the doorway, then I brought her back upstairs. The moment that cage comes in here, we grab it, take off these ridiculous clothes, and wish our way back to N^o1.”

Holly checked herself in the mirror. She looked like a presidential bodyguard—from another planet. “That sounds so simple.”

“It was simple. Will be. Butler never even entered the study. All we need to do is stand here and wait.”

“And how did you find this particular moment?”

Artemis swept a sheaf of black hair back from his brow, revealing mismatched sorrowful eyes.

“Listen,” he said, pointing toward the ceiling.

Holly tucked strands of silver hair behind one ear and cocked her head to one side to focus her considerable sense of hearing. She heard the grandfather clock, and the time travelers’ beating hearts, but above them there was a strident, hysterical voice.

“Mother,” said Artemis, eyes downcast. “It was the first time that she did not recognize me. She is at this moment threatening to call the police. In a moment she runs downstairs to the phone, and discovers Butler.”

Holly understood. How could any son forget a moment like that one? Finding it again must have been easy and painful.

“I remember it clearly. We had just returned from Rathdown Park, the private zoo, and I thought I should check how she was feeling before flying to Morocco. In a month from now, she won’t be able to look after herself anymore.”

Holly squeezed his forearm. “It’s fine, Artemis. This is all in the past. In a few minutes your mother will be back on her feet. She will love you as she always has.”

Artemis nodded glumly. He knew it was probably true, but he also knew that he would never fully escape the specter of this bad memory.

Upstairs, Angeline Fowl’s voice moved from her bedchamber to the upper landing, trailing shrill notes behind her.

Artemis pulled Holly back against the wall.

“Butler will be on the stairs now. We should keep to the shadows, just in case.”

Holly couldn’t help a flutter of nerves. “You’re sure he stays outside? The last time I faced Butler as an enemy, I had the entire LEP on my side. I don’t relish the thought of meeting him armed with nothing more than a silver wig.”

“Calm yourself, Captain,” said Artemis, unconsciously patronizing. “He stays outside. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Saw what with your own eyes?” asked Butler, who had appeared in the archway behind them, having let himself in through the adjoining bedroom door.

Artemis felt his pulse throb in his fingertips. How could this be? This was not the way it had happened. Artemis had never been on the receiving end of Butler’s glare before, and understood for the first time just how terrifying his bodyguard could be.

“You two kids have been helping yourselves to the Fowl wardrobe, I see,” continued Butler without waiting for an answer to his question. “Now, are you going to cause a fuss or are you going to come quietly? Let me give you a hint: the correct answer is *come quietly*.”

Magic is the only way out, Holly realized.

She twisted her chin sharply to call on her fairy power. If she couldn't stun Butler, she would *mesmerize* him.

“Stand down, human,” she intoned, voice loaded with hypnotic magic. But the *mesmer* is a two-pronged attack, audio and visual. Butler could hear the magical words, but eye contact was not consistent in the shadows.

“What?” he said, surprised. “How did you . . .” The hulking bodyguard had been drugged enough times to realize that his will was being sapped. Somehow these kids were putting him under. He staggered backward, his shoulder bashing against the arch.

“Sleep, Butler,” said the little one in the starship trooper wig.

She knows me?

This was serious. These two had done some surveillance and decided to break in anyway.

I have to neutralize them before I pass out, thought Butler. If I go down, Master Artemis and Mrs. Fowl are defenseless.

He had two options: fall on the midget burglars or shoot them with the tranquilizer pistol he was carrying for the planned animal abduction at Rathdown Park.

He chose the second option. At least tranquilizer darts would not smother these two or crush their bones. Butler felt mildly guilty about his decision to “tranq” a couple of kids, but not overly so; after all, he worked for Artemis Fowl and knew exactly how dangerous children could be.

The starship trooper came out of the shadows, and Butler could see her eyes clearly. One blue, one tawny.

“Sleep, Butler,” she said again in that melodious layered voice. “Aren't your eyelids heavy? Sleep.”

She's hypnotizing me! Butler realized. He dragged out the pistol with fingers that felt as though they had been dipped in molten rubber then sprinkled with ball bearings.

“*You* sleep,” he mumbled, then shot the girl in the hip.

Holly stared in disbelief at the hypodermic dart sticking out of her leg.

“Not again,” she moaned, then collapsed to the floor.

Butler's head cleared immediately. The other intruder did not move an inch.

The little girl is the professional of the two, thought Butler, climbing to his feet. I wonder what this scruffy individual contributes to the partnership.

Artemis quickly saw that he had no choice but to reveal his identity and enlist Butler as an ally.

This will be difficult. I have nothing more than a passing resemblance to my younger self as proof.

Still, he had to try before his plan unraveled utterly.

“Listen, Butler,” he began. “I have something to tell you—”

Butler didn't entertain another word. “No, no, no,” he said briskly, shooting Artemis in the shoulder. “No more talking from either of you.”

Artemis pulled out the dart, but it was too late. The tiny reservoir of sedative was empty.

“Butler!” he gasped, dropping to his knees. “You shot me.”

“Everyone knows my name,” sighed the bodyguard, bending to sling the intruders over his shoulders.

“I am intrigued,” said ten-year-old Artemis Fowl, studying the two individuals in the Bentley trunk. “Something extraordinary has happened here.”

“Hardly extraordinary,” said Butler, checking the girl’s pulse. “Two thieves somehow broke into the manor.”

“They bypassed all the security. Not so much as a blip on the motion sensors?”

“Nothing. I just happened on them during a routine sweep. Hiding in the shadows, wearing cast-offs from the wardrobe.”

Artemis tapped his chin. “Hmm. So you didn’t find their clothes.”

“Not a stitch.”

“Which would mean that they broke in here and bypassed security in their underwear.”

“That is extraordinary,” admitted Butler.

Artemis took a penlight from his jacket pocket and shone it on Holly, setting the strands of her silver wig sparkling like a disco ball. “There’s something about this one. Her bone structure is very unusual. The cheekbones are high, Slavic, perhaps, and the brow is wide and childlike. But the proportion of skull to torso is adult, not infant.”

Butler chuckled low in his throat. “So they’re aliens?”

“The young man is human, but she’s something else,” said Artemis thoughtfully. “Genetically enhanced, perhaps.” He moved the beam of light along her cheekbone. “See here. The ears are pointed. Amazing.”

Artemis felt an excitement buzzing on his forehead. Something was happening here. Something important. There were surely serious amounts of money to be earned from this situation.

He rubbed his palms briskly. “Very well. I cannot be distracted by this now. Long term, this strange creature could make our fortune, but right now we need to get that lemur.”

Butler was crestfallen but covered it by slamming the trunk. “I had hoped we could forget the monkey. I was trained in several forms of martial arts; none of them had a monkey defense.”

“It’s a lemur, Butler. And I am aware that you believe this operation is beneath us, but my father’s life is at stake.”

“Of course, Artemis. Whatever you say.”

“Exactly. So here is the plan. We will proceed to Rathdown Park as planned, and after we have done the deal with the Extinctionists, then I can decide what to do with our two guests. I presume they will be safe in the trunk?”

Butler snorted. “Are you kidding?”

Artemis did not smile. “Perhaps you have not noticed, Butler. I rarely *kid*.”

“As you say, young master. You are not a kidder. Maybe someday, eh?”

“Perhaps when I find my father.”

“Yes. Perhaps then. Anyway, to answer your question: this is your *father*’s car, and there have been more prisoners in this trunk than you’ve had birthdays. Mafiya, Triad, Yakuza, Tijuana Cartel, Hells Angels. You name the gang, and a couple of them have spent a night in this trunk. In fact, your

father had it specially modified. There's air-conditioning, a stay-cool light, soft suspension, and even drinking water."

"Is it secure? Remember, our captives already broke into the manor."

Butler closed the trunk. "Titanium lock, reinforced trunk door. No way out whatsoever. Those two are staying in there until we let them out."

"Excellent," said Artemis, sliding into the Bentley's rear seat. "Just give me a moment to do this one little thing, then let's forget about them and concentrate on the lemur."

"Excellent," echoed Butler, and then under his breath, "Monkey business. My favorite."

Rathdown Park

Even though Holly was ten pounds lighter than Artemis, she came to her senses before him. She was glad to be awake, as her dream had been terrible. While she was asleep, her knees and elbows struck the metal walls of the Bentley trunk, and she had imagined herself in an LEP submarine.

Holly lay huddled in the dark, swallowing and blinking to conquer the phobia. Her mother had been mortally injured in a metal box, and now she was inside one.

And it was thoughts of her mother that finally calmed Holly. She opened her eyes and explored the confined space with her vision and fingertips. It didn't take long to find the bubble light set into the steel wall. She snapped it on to find Artemis stretched beside her, and the sloping metal sheeting of a trunk door curling down past his arm. Her own borrowed shoes rested on the shining curve of a wheel arch. They were inside a vehicle.

Artemis groaned, twitched, and opened his eyes.

"Sell the Phonetix shares," he blurted, then remembered Butler and the darts. "Holly. Holly?"

Holly patted his leg. "It's okay, Artemis," she said in Gnommish, in case the car was bugged. "I'm here. Where else could I be?"

Artemis shifted onto his side, flicking back the dense black hair obscuring his features, and spoke in the fairy tongue.

"We received the same dosage of tranquilizer, and yet you, the lighter person, are awake first. Magic?"

The side of Holly's face was thrown into deep shadow by the bubble light. "Yes. N^o1's signature magic is powerful stuff."

"Powerful enough to get us out of here?"

Holly spent a minute exploring the trunk's surface, running her fingertips along each weld in the metal. Finally she shook her head, silver wig sparkling. "Not a weak spot I can find. Even the air-conditioning vent is completely flush. No way out."

"Of course not," said Artemis. "We're inside the Bentley. The trunk is a steel box with a titanium lock." He breathed the cool air deeply. "How can this have happened? Everything is different. Butler was supposed to have deposited the cage in my study. Instead he creeps in through the bedroom and sedates us both. Now we don't know where we are, or indeed where the lemur is. Do they have it already?"

Holly pressed one ear to the trunk door. "I can tell you where we are."

Outside, the sounds of snuffling and snoring animals drifted on the air. "We're close to animals. A park, I would guess, or a zoo."

“Rathdown Park,” exclaimed Artemis. “And that fact tells us they do not, in fact, have the lemur. The schedule and situation have changed.”

Holly was thoughtful. “We are not in control of this situation anymore, Artemis. Perhaps it’s time to admit defeat and return home, when your younger self brings us back to the manor. *Perhaps* you can discover a cure in the future.”

Artemis had been expecting this suggestion. “I considered that. The lemur is still our best option, and we are just a few feet away from it. Give me five minutes to get us out of here.”

Holly was understandably dubious. “Five minutes? Even the great Artemis Fowl might have trouble breaking out of a steel box in five minutes.”

Artemis closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to ignore his cramped surroundings and the sheaves of hair brushing his cheeks, and the itch of bristles on his chin.

“Face it, Artemis,” said Holly impatiently. “We’re stuck. Even Mulch Diggums would probably struggle with a lock like that if he happened to stroll by.”

Artemis’s brow flickered, irritated by this interruption, but then a smile spread across his face, made eerie by the stark lighting.

“Mulch Diggums strolling by,” he whispered. “What are the chances of that?”

“Zero,” said Holly. “Absolutely none. I would bet my pension on it.”

At that moment something, or someone, tapped on the trunk door from the outside.

Holly rolled her eyes. “No. Not even you . . .”

Artemis’s smile was smug beyond belief. “Just how large is your pension?”

“I do not believe it. I *refuse* to believe it. It is impossible.”

More taps on the door now, followed by a delicate scraping and a muted swearword.

“What a guttural voice,” said Artemis. “Very like a dwarf’s.”

“It could be Butler,” argued Holly, irritated by Artemis’s self-satisfied expression.

“Swearing in Gnommish. Hardly.”

More metallic noises from the outside world.

Shhhnick. Chunk. Clackack.

And the trunk’s lid swung upward, revealing a slice of starry night with the glinting silhouette of a gigantic pylon behind it. A bedraggled head popped into the space, features smeared with mud and worse. This was a face that only a mother could love, and then perhaps only if her sight were failing. The dark close-set eyes peered out from above a dense beard that shivered slightly, like seaweed in a current. The creature’s teeth were large, square, and not made any more appealing by the large insect wriggling between two molars.

It was, of course, Mulch Diggums.

The dwarf snagged the unfortunate insect with his tongue, then chewed it delicately.

“Ground beetle,” he said with relish. “*Leistus montanus*. Nice bouquet, solid earthy shell; then once the carapace cracks, a veritable explosion of flavors on the palate.”

He swallowed the unfortunate creature, then funneled a mighty burp through his flapping lips.

“Never burp when you’re tunneling,” he advised Artemis and Holly as casually as though they were sitting around a café table. “Dirt coming down, air coming up. Not a good idea.”

Holly knew Mulch well. This chitchat was simply for distraction while he took a peek around.

“And now to business,” said the dwarf finally, discarding the dead beard hair he had used to pick the lock. “I seem to have a human and an elf trapped in a car. So I ask myself, should I let ’em out?”

“And what do you answer yourself?” asked Artemis with barely contained impatience.

Mulch’s black pebble eyes danced in the moonlight. “So, the Mud Boy understands Gnommish. Interesting. Well, understand *this*, human. I let you out as soon as I get my money.”

Ah, thought Holly. There is money involved. Somehow these two have set up a deal.

Holly had endured her prison for long enough. Mulch is not yet my friend, she thought. So there’s no need to be polite.

She drew a knee to her chin, tugging on it with both hands for an extra pound of elastic force.

Mulch realized what she was about to do. “Hey, elf. No—”

Which was as far as he got before his face was batted with the trunk door. The dwarf tumbled backward into the hole he had climbed out of, sending up an *oof* of wind and dirt.

Holly clambered over Artemis to the fresh air. She gulped down great gasps, chest out, face to the sky.

“Sorry,” she said between breaths. “That space is tiny. I don’t like tiny.”

“Claustrophobic?” asked Artemis, rolling from the trunk.

Holly nodded. “I used to be. I thought I had overcome it. Lately, though . . .”

There was a commotion in the dwarf hole. A blue riot of swearing, and a scuffling in the earth.

Holly quickly recovered herself and leaped into the pit, tackling Mulch before he could unhinge his jaw and disappear.

“He could be useful,” she grunted, bundling the protesting dwarf up the incline. “And he has already seen us, so the damage has been done.”

“That’s a pincer hold,” exclaimed Mulch. “You’re LEP.”

He twisted around, snagging Holly’s wig with his beard hair. “I *know* you. Holly Short. *Captain* Holly Short. One of Julius Root’s pet rottweilers.” Suddenly the dwarf’s already creased brow wrinkled further in confusion. “But this is impossible.”

Before Artemis could instruct Holly not to ask, she went ahead and did it.

“Why is it impossible, Mulch?”

Mulch did not reply, but his eyes betrayed him, glancing guiltily over his shoulder at a scuffed Tekfab backpack. Holly deftly spun the dwarf around and opened the bag’s main compartment.

“Quite a treasure trove we have here,” she said, rummaging in the backpack. “Medi-kit, rations, adhesive com-pads. And look, an old omnitool.” Then she recognized the inscription laser etched into the base. “It’s *my* old omnitool.”

In spite of their years of friendship, Holly turned the full force of her anger on Mulch.

“Where did you get this?” she shouted. “How did you get it?”

“A present,” offered Mulch lamely. “From my . . . eh . . .” He squinted to read the writing on the base. “From my mother. She always called me Holly because of my, erm, prickly personality.”

Holly was angrier than Artemis had ever seen her. “Tell me, Diggums. The truth!”

Mulch thought about fighting. It was in the curve of his fingers and the baring of his teeth, but the moment passed quickly, and the dwarf’s natural passive nature surfaced.

“I stole all this stuff from Tara,” he admitted. “I’m a thief, aren’t I? But in my defense, I had a

difficult childhood, which led to low self-esteem, which I projected onto others and punished them by stealing their possessions. So in a very real way, I am the victim here. And *I forgive me.*”

Mulch’s trademark waffle reminded Holly of the friend he would become, and her anger evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. She traced the laser inscription with a fingertip.

“My mother gave me this,” she said quietly. “Most reliable omnitool I ever had. Then, one night in Hamburg, my fugitive locked himself in a car. So I reached for my omnitool and it was gone. The target was apprehended by humans; I lost my first fugitive; and Commander Root had to send in an entire team of techies to clean up. It was a disaster. And all this time it was you.”

Mulch was puzzled. “All this time? I stole this from a belt in a locker in Tara *an hour ago*. I saw you there. What’s going on here . . . ?” Then Mulch blinked and clapped his hairy palms. “Oh, bless my bum-flap. You’re time travelers.”

Holly realized that she had said too much. “That’s ridiculous.”

The dwarf was actually doing a little jig now. “No. No, it all adds up. You’re talking about *future* events in the *past* tense. You sent back a note so that I would come and rescue you here and now.” Mulch clapped his hands to his cheeks in mock horror. “What you’re doing is so much more illegal than anything I could ever do. Imagine the reward I would get for turning you over to Julius Root.”

“Sent back a note?” scoffed Holly. “That’s absurd, isn’t it, Artemis?”

“Most certainly,” said Artemis. “But if someone were to send back a note from the future, when and where would they send it to?”

Mulch jerked a thumb toward Holly. “There’s a junction box beside her locker. Looked like it hadn’t been touched for years. I was checking it out because sometimes they have valuable tech in ’em. Not this one, though, just an envelope addressed to me. And inside a note asking me to come to this place and set you free.”

Artemis smiled. Satisfied. “I imagine there was an incentive offered for our rescue?”

Mulch’s beard hair crackled. “A large incentive. No . . . a *stupendous* incentive.”

“Stupendous, eh? Very well, you shall have it.”

“When?” asked Mulch hungrily.

“Soon. I just need you to do me one more favor.”

“I knew it,” said the dwarf, through grinding teeth. “Never do the job until you see the cash. Why should I trust you?”

Artemis took a step forward, eyes narrow behind a curtain of dark hair. “You don’t need to trust me, Mulch. You need to be afraid of me. I am a Mud Boy from your future, and I could be in your past too, if you choose not to cooperate. I found you once, I could certainly do it again. The next time you break into a car trunk, there could be a gun and a badge waiting for you.”

Mulch felt apprehension tingling in his beard hair, and his beard hair was rarely wrong. As his grandmother used to say: *Trust the hair, Mulch. Trust the hair.* This human was dangerous, and he had enough trouble in his life already.

“Okay, Mud Boy,” he said grudgingly. “One more favor. And then you’d better have a stupendous amount of gold for me.”

“I will. Fear not, my pungent friend.”

The dwarf was deeply offended. “Don’t call me *friend*. Just tell me. What. You. Want. Done.”

“Simply follow your nature and dig us a tunnel. I need to steal a lemur.”

Mulch nodded as though lemur-napping was the most natural thing in the world.

“And from whom are we stealing it?”

“From me.”

Mulch frowned, then the penny dropped. “Ah . . . time travel throws up all sorts of twists, doesn’t it?”

Holly slipped the omnitool into her pocket. “Tell me about it,” she said.

TALK TO THE ANIMALS

Rathdown Park, County Wicklow, Ireland

The Fowl Bentley was protected by a fingerprint scanner, and a keypad that required an eight-digit code. The code was changed every month, and so it took Artemis a few seconds to mentally rewind almost eight years and remember the right set of numbers.

He slid across the front seat's tan leather upholstery and pressed his thumb to a second scanner tucked behind the steering wheel. A spring-loaded compartment slid smoothly from the dash. It was not a large compartment, but big enough to hold a clip of cash, platinum credit cards, and a spare cell phone in its cradle.

"No gun?" said Holly, when Artemis emerged from the car, though one of Butler's guns would be clunky in her fingers.

"No gun," confirmed Artemis.

"I wouldn't be able to hit an elephant with one of Butler's pistols even if I had one."

"Elephants are not the quarry this evening," said Artemis, speaking in English now that they were out of the trunk. "Lemurs are. At any rate, as we could hardly shoot at our opponent on this particular adventure, perhaps it's better that we are unarmed."

"Not really," said Holly. "I may not be able to shoot you or the lemur, but I bet that more *opponents* will turn up. You have a knack for making enemies."

Artemis shrugged. "Genius inspires resentment. A sad fact of life."

"Genius *and* robbing stuff," Mulch chimed in from his perch on the lip of the car trunk. "Take it from one who knows, nobody likes a smart thief."

Artemis drummed his fingers on the fender.

"We have certain advantages. Elfin magic. Digging talents. I have almost eight more years of experience in the art of mischief-making that the other Artemis does not have."

"Mischief-making?" Holly scoffed. "I think you're being a little gentle on yourself. Grand larceny is closer to the mark."

Artemis stopped drumming. "One of your fairy powers is speaking in tongues, correct?"

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" responded Holly.

"Just how many tongues can you speak in?"

Holly smiled. She knew Artemis's devious mind well enough to realize exactly where he was

going with this.

“As many as you want.”

“Good,” said Artemis. “We need to split up. You take the aboveground route into Rathdown Park, Mulch and I travel underground. If we need a distraction, use your gift.”

“It would be a pleasure,” said Holly, and immediately turned translucent, as though she were a creature of purest water. The last thing to go was her smile.

Just like the Cheshire cat.

Artemis remembered a few lines from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” said Alice. “Oh, you can’t help that,” said the cat. “We’re all mad here.”

Artemis glanced at the pungent dwarf searching his living beard for stored insects.

We’re all mad here too, he thought.

Holly approached the main door of Rathdown institute with care even though she was shielded. The People had thought themselves invisible to Butler once before and had paid with trauma and bruises. She would not underestimate the bodyguard, and the fact that he was once again her enemy set her stomach churning with nervous acid.

The human clothes jumped and scratched along her frame. They were not built for shielding, and in a matter of minutes they would shake to pieces. *miss my Neutrino*, she thought, looking at the reinforced steel door with the dark unknown beyond it. And I miss Foaly and his satellite linkups.

But at heart Holly was an adventurer, and so the idea of quitting never even occurred to her.

It was difficult to operate mechanisms while shielded, so Holly powered down for the few seconds necessary to jimmy the door with her omnitool. It was an old model, but Holly’s mother had paid an extra few ingots for upgrades. The standard omnitool would open any door operating on a simple mechanical lock and key system. This one could short electronic locks too, and even deactivate simple alarms.

But that shouldn’t be necessary, she thought. As far as Artemis remembers, he turned off all the alarms.

The thought didn’t give much comfort. Artemis had been wrong about this trip already.

In less than five seconds the omnitool did its job and vibrated gently, like a cat purring at its own cleverness. The heavy door swung open silently under the lightest touch, and Holly buzzed up her shield.

Stepping into the Rathdown institute, Holly felt more mission anxiety than she had in years.

I’m a rookie again. Some kid straight out of the academy, she realized. My mind is experienced, but my body is overruling it.

And then: I better get this monkey quick, before adolescence kicks in.

Young Artemis had turned off the security on his way into the institute. It had been an easy thing to bypass all the alarms with the director’s pass card. Earlier in the day, when he had been given the guided tour, he had posed several complicated questions on the validity of the theory of evolution. The director, a committed evolutionist, had allowed Artemis’s arguments to distract him long enough to

have his pocket picked by Butler. Once the pass card was in the bodyguard's possession, he simply slotted it into a battery-powered card cloner in his breast pocket, and whistled a few bars of Mozart to cover the whirr of the machine.

Two minutes later all the information they needed was stored in the cloner's memory, the director's card was back in the man's pocket, and Artemis suddenly decided that maybe evolution wasn't a bad theory after all.

Though there are more holes in it than a Dutch dam made of Swiss cheese, he had confided to Butler on the way home from Rathdown Park. Butler had been encouraged by this statement. It was almost a straightforward joke.

Later that evening young Artemis had popped a button camera into the air-conditioning duct at the rear of the Bentley.

All the better to keep an eye on our guests.

The female was interesting. *Fascinating*, in fact. The darts would wear off soon, and it would be intriguing to watch her reaction, much more so than that of the hirsute teenager, even though his broad forehead suggested intelligence and his general features had a lot in common with the Fowl family's own. In fact, he reminded Artemis of an old photo he had once seen of his father as a boy, working on an archaeological dig in South America. Perhaps the male captive was a distant cousin hoping to claim some kind of birthright now that Father was missing. There was much to be investigated here.

The button camera was broadcasting to his cell phone and ten-year-old Artemis checked the screen occasionally as Butler guided him through Rathdown Park toward the lemur's cage.

"Focus, Artemis," chided the bodyguard. "One dastardly crime at a time."

Artemis glanced up from his phone. "Dastardly, Butler? *Dastardly*? Honestly, we are not cartoon characters. I do not have a villainous laugh or an eye patch."

"Not yet. Though you'll have an eye patch soon enough if you don't concentrate on the job at hand."

They were passing underneath Rathdown Park's aquarium through a Plexiglas tunnel that allowed scientists and the occasional visitor to observe the species housed in the million-gallon tank. The tank mimicked as far as possible the inhabitants' natural environment. Different compartments had different temperatures and different vegetation. Some were salt water, others were fresh, but all housed endangered or rare creatures.

Tiny bulbs dotted the ceiling above, simulating stars, and the only other light came from the bioluminescence of an albino lantern shark, which shadowed Artemis and Butler along the tunnel until its snout bumped Plexiglas.

Artemis was more interested in his cell phone than the shark's eerily glowing photophores.

Events were unfolding on his screen that were close to incredible. Artemis stopped in his tracks to fully absorb what he was seeing.

The Fowl Manor intruders had escaped the Bentley trunk with the help of an accomplice. Another nonhuman.

I am entering a new world here. These creatures are potentially more lucrative than a lemur. Should I abandon this venture and concentrate on the nonhumans?

Artemis maximized the volume on his handset, but the tiny microphone attached to the button camera could only pick up snatches of the conversation.

It was mostly in some alien tongue, but some of the talk was in English, and he heard the word

lemur more than once.

Perhaps this lemur is more valuable than I realized. The animal is the bait that lures these creatures in.

A minute passed with only the small revolting dwarflike thing in the screen, perching its disproportionately large backside on the rim of the trunk; then the female appeared, only to promptly disappear, Rathdown Park's famous pylons filling the screen where she had been.

Artemis tightened his grip on the phone.

Invisibility? The energy involved in creating a reflective field or needed to generate high-speed vibration must be incredible.

He quickly navigated the phone's menu and activated the digital thermal imager, a decidedly nonstandard option, and was relieved to see the female creature's form blossom on screen in warm tones.

Good. Not gone, just hard to see.

Keeping one eye on his phone, Artemis called to his bodyguard. "Butler, old friend. Slight change of plan."

The bodyguard knew better than to hope the lemur hunt was off. "We're still on the trail of a little creature, though, I'll bet."

"Creatures," said ten-year-old Artemis. "Plural."

Fourteen-year-old Artemis was not enjoying the view. To distract himself he composed a haiku describing the sight before him.

Pale, shuddering globes

Churn their poisonous cargo

Bald heads in a bag

Mulch Diggums was not feeling quite so poetic. He stopped digging and rehinged his jaw.

"Could you please stop shining that flashlight on my backside? I blister easily. We dwarfs are extremely photosensitive, even to artificial light."

Artemis had taken the flashlight from the Bentley's breakdown kit and was following Mulch through a fresh tunnel to the lemur's cage. The dwarf had assured him that the tunnel was sufficiently short for him to hold in the dirt and air until they reached the other end, making it safe for Artemis to be directly behind him.

Artemis averted the light for a few seconds, thinking that a bum blister was the last thing he wanted to see; but after a while the beam strayed back onto the pale, wobbling flesh once more.

"Just a quick question. If you can hold in all the diggings, then why does your bum-flap need to be open?"

Mulch was spitting large wads of dwarf phlegm onto the wall to shore up the tunnel.

"In case of emergency," he explained, "I could swallow a buried lug of metal, or a strip of old tire. Now, those I would have to evacuate on the spot, annoying Mud Boy to the rear or not. No sense in ruining my trousers too, is there, dopey?"

"I suppose not," said Artemis, thinking that with such a wide-bore loaded weapon pointed at him,

he could bear being called *dopey*.

“Anyway,” continued the dwarf, hawking another wad at the wall, “you should consider yourself privileged. Not many humans have seen a dwarf working with spittle. This is what you might call an ancient art. First you—”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Artemis impatiently. “First you excavate, then you strengthen the walls with your spittle, which hardens on contact with the air, providing it’s out of your mouth, obviously. And it’s luminous too, amazing material.”

Mulch’s behind wobbled in surprise. “How do you know these secrets?”

“You told me, or rather, you will tell me. Time travel, remember?”

The dwarf peered over his shoulders, eyes red in the glow of his spittle. “Just how close do we become?”

“Very close. We get an apartment together, and after a whirlwind courtship you marry my sister and honeymoon in Vegas.”

“I love Vegas,” said Mulch wistfully. Then, “Such snide wit. I can see how we might be friends. All the same, keep your comments to yourself, or we might have to see how funny you are covered in tunnel waste.”

Artemis swallowed hard, then moved the flashlight away from Mulch’s behind.

The plan was a simple one. They would tunnel underneath the compound and wait below the lemur’s cage for Holly to contact them on the short-range LEP adhesive communicator stuck to Artemis’s cheek, part of Mulch’s stash. From that point forward, the plan became fluid. Either they would pop up and grab the lemur while Holly caused consternation among the animals, or if young Artemis had already secured the lemur, Mulch would dig a hole under Butler and make it easier for Holly to relieve the boy of his prize.

All very straightforward, thought Artemis. Which is unusual for me.

“Okay, Mud Boy,” said Mulch, scooping a bulb-shaped hollow with his flat fingers. “We are here. X marks the monkey.”

“Lemur,” corrected Artemis automatically. “Are you certain you can distinguish this particular animal’s scent from all the others?”

Mulch held a hand to his heart in mock affront. “I? Certain? I am a dwarf, human. A dwarf nose can tell the difference between grass and clover. Between black hair and brown. Between dog poo and wolf poo.”

Artemis groaned. “I shall take that as a yes.”

“And so you should. Keep this up and I may choose not to marry your sister.”

“If I had a sister, I’m sure she would be inconsolable.”

They crouched in the hollow for several minutes, the park’s nighttime growls and snores drifting down through the clay. By some curious anomaly, once the sounds penetrated the tunnel’s coating of dwarf spittle, they were trapped inside and bounced off the walls in conflicting waves. Artemis felt as though he were literally in the lion’s den.

As if this wasn’t disturbing enough, he noticed that Mulch’s cheeks were glowing bright pink. All of them.

“Problems?” he asked, unable to mask a nervous tremor.

“I’ve been holding in this gas for a long time,” replied the dwarf through clenched teeth. “It’s coming out soon. You got any sinus problems?”

Artemis shook his head.

“Pity,” said Mulch. “This would have cleared them right up.”

If it hadn't been for Artemis's determination to save his mother, he would have bolted right then.

Luckily for Artemis's nasal passages, Holly beeped him on the ad-com. The communicator was a basic vibration model that sent signals directly to Artemis's ear without any external noise. Artemis heard Holly's words but not her voice. The ad-com was only sophisticated enough to produce robotic tones.

“In position. Over.”

Artemis placed a finger on the communicator, completing the circuit that allowed him to speak.

“Received. We are directly below the target's cage. Can you see the opposition?”

“Negative. No visual. But I do see the lemur. He seems to be asleep on a low branch. I can easily reach him.”

“Negative, Holly. Hold your position. We will secure the target. You watch for my younger self.”

“Understood. Don't hang around, Arty. Get up, get down, and back to the car.”

Arty?

Artemis was surprised that Holly would call him that. It was his mother's pet name for him.

“Got it. Up, down, and back.”

Arty?

Mulch tapped him urgently on the shoulder. “Whenever you're ready, Mud Boy. Now would be great.”

“Very well. Proceed. Try to be quiet.”

Mulch changed position and pointed the crown of his head at the tunnel roof, squatting low on his haunches.

“Too late for quiet,” he grunted. “Pull your jacket over your face.”

Artemis barely had time to do what he'd been asked, when Mulch released a thundering cylinder of gas and earth, spraying the boy with undigested clods. The shell of dwarf spittle cracked in a thousand places, and Mulch was borne aloft by a churning pillar of force, easily punching through to the surface.

Once the dust had settled somewhat, Artemis scrambled after him into the cage. Mulch had pinballed off a low cage ceiling and was unconscious, blood matting his already tangled hair, his bum-flap fluttering like a wind sock while the remainder of the tunnel waste escaped.

Low cage ceiling?

The lemur in the next cage seemed highly amused by all the commotion, and hopped up and down on a truncated branch wedged between the bars.

The next cage, realized Artemis. We are not in the lemur's cage. What cage are we in?

Before he had time to investigate, his cheek beeped, and an emotionless robotic voice droned into his ear.

“Get Mulch out of there, Arty. Get back down now.”

What is it? wondered Artemis. What's in this cage?

Then a four-hundred-pound Ugandan mountain gorilla crashed into him, leaving the thought behind like a speech bubble.

Young Artemis and Butler were watching all of this through the slot windows of a camouflaged hide that sat in front of the cages. The hide had been built inside a rockery and water feature and allowed close study of the various animals without disturbing the natural rhythms of their day. The director had been kind enough to let Artemis sit in the observer's chair earlier that day.

"Someday we'll be able to run the hide's thermal imaging camera and all this equipment from that chair," he had said.

"Perhaps sooner than that," Artemis had replied.

"Oh dear," said Butler, the phrase sounding over-delicate in his gravelly voice. "That must really have hurt."

He reached into his pocket for the dart gun. "I'd better lend a hand, or at least a dart."

Butler had been busy with his darts. Two night workers lay unconscious on cots at the rear of the hide.

Through the slot window they had a clear view of the male intruder being shaken like a rag doll by an enormous gorilla. The cage's third occupant had collapsed and appeared to be racked by an energetic bout of flatulence.

Incredible, thought Artemis. This day is full of surprises.

He tapped a few keys on the computer keyboard before him, redirecting the compound's thermal imaging camera.

"I don't think a dart will be necessary," he said. "Help is already on the way."

Sure enough, a red-hearted glow bounced across the cobbled walkway, hovering before the gorilla cage.

"Now, this should be interesting," mused ten-year-old Artemis.

Holly was forced into action. She had been discreetly tucked away behind the broad trunk of an imported baobab tree, shield off, conserving magic, keeping an eye out for young Artemis, when Mulch blew a hole in the earth into the wrong cage. He exploded from the ground in a minicyclone of debris and bounced off a few surfaces like a cartoon pinball, before collapsing onto the cage floor.

The cage's resident, a black-and-gray bull gorilla, shot straight up, woken from deep sleep. His eyes were wide but blurred, his teeth yellow and bared.

Stay down, Artemis, she thought. Stay in the hole.

No such luck. Artemis clambered to the surface, carefully navigating the simple climb. The time stream had not granted him any agility. As Artemis often said, the physical was not his area.

Holly thumbed her ad-com. "Get Mulch out of there, Arty," she shouted. "Get back down now."

It was too late. The gorilla had decided these newcomers were a threat to be dealt with. It rolled from its nest of leaves and bark, landing on eight knuckles, the impact sending a jarring wave along its arm hair.

Holly buzzed up her shield as she ran, silver strands floating behind her as the wig fell apart, marking her trail.

The gorilla attacked, grabbing a surprised Artemis Fowl by the shoulders, roaring in his face, head back, teeth like a bear trap.

Holly was at the gate, powering down, pulling the omnitool from her pocket, jabbing the business end into the lock. She surveyed the scene inside the cage while she waited for the tool to work.

Mulch was up and on his elbows now, shaking a groggy head. It would be a moment or two before he was in any shape to help, if he deigned to help a human stranger.

Anyway, it was immaterial; a moment or two would be too late for Artemis.

The omnitool beeped and the cage door swung open, a narrow walkway extended from the footpath crossing a moat and slotting into grooves on the habitat floor.

Holly charged across without hesitation, waving her arms, shouting, making herself a target.

The gorilla huffed and snorted, gathering Artemis close to its chest, warning Holly to stay back. Artemis's head flopped on his shoulders, and his eyes were half closed.

Holly stopped ten feet from the animal and lowered her arms and gaze. A nonthreatening stance.

The gorilla made a few fake attacks, thundering to within a foot of Holly then contemptuously turning his back, all the while grunting and barking, pressing Artemis to his chest. Artemis's hair was slicked back with blood, and a crimson trickle leaked from the corner of his left eye. One arm was broken, and blood pouched the sleeve of his tracksuit.

Holly was shocked. Appalled. She felt like crying and running away. Her friend was injured, possibly dead.

Get a grip! she told herself. *You are older than you look.*

One of the fairy magical powers was the gift of tongues, and this encompassed a rudimentary grasp of some of the more sophisticated animal tongues. She would never be discussing global warming with a dolphin, but she knew enough for basic communication.

With gorillas it was as much about body language as what was actually said. Holly squatted low, elbows crooked, knuckles on the earth, spine curved forward—the posture of a friend—then she funneled her lips and hooted several times. *Danger!* the hoots said. *Danger is near!*

The gorilla did a comical double take, amazed to hear gorilla-speak coming from this creature. It sensed a trick but was not sure what that trick might be. And when in doubt, beat your chest.

The gorilla dropped Artemis, stood tall on two feet, thrusting forward chin and pectorals, and began beating its chest with open palms.

I am king here. Do not trifle with me, was the clear message.

A wise sentiment indeed, but Holly had no choice.

She darted forward, hooting all the time, throwing in the odd terrified screech, and then, against the advice of every wildlife expert who had ever held a steady-cam, she looked directly into the animal's eyes.

Leopard, she hooted, layering her voice with the fairy *mesmer*. *Leopard!*

The gorilla's fury was replaced by dull confusion, which was in turn pushed aside by terror.

Leopard! Holly hooted. *Climb!*

Moving with less than its customary grace, the gorilla stumbled toward the rear of the cage, moving as though underwater, senses dulled by the *mesmer*. Trees and foliage were batted aside, leaving a wake of sap-crowned trunks and flattened grass. In moments the animal had disappeared deep into the dark recesses of its artificial habitat.

Fearful gibberings floated from the upper canopy.

Holly would feel bad later for putting the beast under a spell, but now there was not a heartbeat to waste on guilt. Artemis was grievously injured, perhaps mortally so.

The gorilla had dropped Artemis like a carcass that had been picked clean. He lay there, still as

the dead.

No. Don't think that.

Holly raced to her friend's side, skidding the final yard on her knees.

Too far gone. He's too far gone.

Artemis's face was pale as bone. His long black hair was matted with blood, and the whites of his eyes were twin crescents through hooded lids.

"Mother," he said, the word riding on a breath.

Holly reached out her hands, magic already dancing on her fingertips, shooting off in arcs like tiny sun flares.

She froze before the magic could make the jump to Artemis's body.

If I heal Artemis will I also damn him? Is my magic tainted with Spelltropy?

Artemis thrashed weakly, and Holly could actually hear bones grating in his sleeve. There was blood on his lips too.

He will die if I don't help. At least if I heal him, there is a chance.

Holly's hands were shaking, and her eyes were blurred with tears.

Pull yourself together. You are a professional.

She didn't feel very professional. She felt like a girl out of her depth.

Your body is playing tricks on your mind. Ignore it.

Holly cupped Artemis's face gently in both hands.

"Heal," she whispered, almost sobbing.

The magical sparks leaped like dogs unleashed, sinking into Artemis's pores, knitting bones, healing skin, staunching internal bleeding.

The sudden transition from death's door to hale and hearty was rough on Artemis. He shuddered and bucked, teeth chattering, hair frizzing in an electric halo.

"Come on, Artemis," said Holly, bending over him like a mourner. "Wake up."

There was no reaction for several seconds. Artemis looked like a healthy corpse, but then that was how he usually looked. Then his mismatched eyes opened, lids flickering like hummingbird wings as his system rebooted. He coughed and shuddered, flexing fingers and toes.

"Holly," he said when his vision had cleared. His smile was sincere and grateful. "You saved me again."

Holly was laughing and crying at the same time, tears spilling onto Artemis's chest.

"Of course I saved you," she said. "I couldn't do without you." And because she was happy and flushed with magic, Holly leaned down and kissed Artemis, magic sparking around the contact like tiny fireworks.

* * *

Ten-year-old Artemis Fowl was keeping one eye on the drama unfolding in the gorilla cage.

"*Troglodytes gorilla*," he commented to Butler. "Given the name by Dr. Thomas S. Savage, an American missionary to western Africa, who first scientifically described the gorilla in 1847."

"You don't say," murmured the bodyguard, who was more interested in the brute's bite radius

than its proper name.

They had used the commotion as cover to slip out from the artificial hide and across the small courtyard to the lemur's cage, which was beside the gorilla's.

The strange newcomers were far too busy to notice them swipe the cage's key-card lock and open the gate door.

"Look at those two. Wasting time. You wouldn't catch me doing that."

Butler snorted, as he usually did immediately before delivering a deadpan line. "Most people never catch you doing anything, Artemis."

Artemis allowed himself a chuckle. This was an interesting day, and he was enjoying the challenges that it presented.

"And there we are," said Artemis quietly. "The last silky sifaka lemur in the world. The hundred-thousand-euro primate."

The lemur was perched high in a Madagascar palm, clinging to the branches with its long grasping toes and opposable thumb digits. Its coat was snow white with a brown patch on the chest.

Artemis pointed at the animal. "That coloring results from chest scent-marking with the sternal-gular gland."

"Uh-huh," said Butler, who cared slightly less about this than he did about the gorilla's scientific name. "Let's just grab the animal and get out of here before our friends next door regroup."

"I think we have a moment or two," said Artemis.

Butler studied the strangers in the adjacent cage. It was surprising that the male was not in pieces by now, but somehow the female had appeared from nowhere and chased the gorilla off. Impressive. That one had a few tricks up her sleeve. There was serious technology behind her. Perhaps some kind of camouflage software in the clothing, which would explain the sparks. The Americans, he knew, were developing an all-terrain camouflage suit. One of his military contacts had sent him a link to a leaked video on the Internet.

There was another creature in the cage, the hairy individual who had released the first two from the Bentley, picking what was supposed to be an unpickable lock in the process. The creature was neither man nor beast, a rough stumpy character who had been propelled through the earth by some force, and was now suffering from a debilitating attack of gas. Somehow, this *thing* had managed to dig a thirty-yard tunnel in a matter of minutes. If it hadn't been for the fact that the cages were modular with overlapping walls, then the creature would have been in the same cage as the lemur. As it was, while it emerged directly below the lemur, it was one cage over.

Butler knew that Artemis would be just itching to study these strange creatures, but now was not the time. They were in a position of total ignorance, and people in that position often died without being enlightened.

The bodyguard drew his dart pistol, but Artemis recognized the sound of a gun sliding from a holster and waved his index finger.

"That's our last option. I don't want our little friend breaking his neck on the way down. First we try gentle persuasion."

From his pocket, Artemis tugged a small ziplock bag containing an amber gel flecked with black and green.

"My own concoction," he explained. "The sifakas are from the Indriidae family of primates, which, as you know, is a strictly vegetarian family."

“Who wouldn’t know that?” wondered Butler, who had not exactly put away his pistol.

Artemis unzipped the bag, releasing a sweet thick aroma that wound its way upward, toward the lemur.

“Sap concentrate, with a potpourri of African vegetation. No lemur could resist this. But if this particular primate’s brain is stronger than his stomach, fire away. One shot, if you please, and avoid the head. The needle alone would probably be enough to crack that tiny skull.”

Butler would have snorted, but the lemur was moving. It crawled along the branch, dipping its pointed nose to catch the odor, touching the smell with a darting pink tongue.

“Hmm,” said the bodyguard. “That concoction won’t work on humans, I suppose.”

“Ask me again in six months,” said Artemis. “I am doing some pheromone experiments.”

The lemur scampered forward now, hypnotized by the glorious aroma. When the branch ran out, it dropped to the ground and hopped forward on two legs, fingers outstretched toward the bag.

Artemis grinned. “This game is over.”

“Maybe not,” said Butler. In the cage beside them, the long-haired boy was on his feet, and the female was making a very strange noise.

The corona of magic around fourteen-year-old Artemis and Holly faded, and along with it went the dreamlike trance insulating Artemis’s mind.

He was instantly alert. Holly had kissed him. Artemis backpedaled, jumping to his feet and spreading his arms wide to counteract the sudden dizziness.

“Eh, thanks,” he said awkwardly. “That was unexpected.”

Holly smiled, feeling a little embarrassed “Artemis. You’re okay. Any more healings and you’ll be nothing but scar tissue held together by magic thread.”

Artemis thought that it would be nice to stay here and talk like this, but one cage over his future was escaping with his past.

He understood immediately what had happened. Mulch’s nose had led them to the right place, but the cages were built like interlocking blocks, and so the lemur had been above them, but also in the next cage. He should have remembered that, if he had been here before. But Artemis had no memory of visiting the central compound. As far as he was aware, the park director had brought the lemur into a special viewing room. This was confusing.

“Very well,” he said. “I see where we are . . .”

He was thinking aloud, steadying his mind, trying to forget the kiss for now. Think about it later.

Artemis rubbed the red sparks from his eyes, then turned as quickly as the post-healing vertigo would allow. There he was, his younger self, enticing the silky sifaka lemur with a bag of amber paste.

Sap, I bet. Perhaps with a few twigs and leaves. Wasn’t I a clever boy.

An immediate solution was needed. A fluid quick-fire plan. Artemis rubbed his eye sockets as if that could sharpen his mind.

“Mulch, can you tunnel?”

The dwarf opened his mouth to answer, but threw up instead.

“I dunno,” he said finally. “My head’s a bit flippy floppy. Stomach too. That bash really shook me.” His belly made a sound like an outboard motor. “’Scuse me. I think I gotta ...”

He did indeed *gotta*. Mulch crawled into a fern patch and let fly with the remainder of his

stomach contents. Several leaves wilted on the spot.

No use, thought Artemis. I need a miracle, or that lemur is gone and dead.

He grabbed Holly's shoulders. "Do you have any magic left?"

"A little, Artemis. A few sparks, maybe."

"Can you talk to the animals?"

Holly twisted her chin to the left until her neck bone clicked, checking the tank.

"I could do that, anything except trolls. They don't fall for that trick."

Artemis nodded, muttering to himself. Thinking.

"Okay. Okay. I want you to scare that lemur away from me. The younger me. And I need confusion. Can you do that?"

"I can try."

Holly closed her eyes, breathed deeply through her nose, filling her lungs, then threw her head back, and howled. It was a fantastic noise. Lions, apes, wolves, and eagles. They were all in there. The howl was punctuated by the staccato chatter of monkeys and the hiss of a thousand snakes.

Artemis the elder stepped back, instinctively terrified. Some primal part of his brain interpreted this message as fear and pain. His skin crawled and he had to fight his every instinct not to run and hide.

Artemis the younger reached down to the lemur, dangling the ziplock bag in front of its twitching nose. The lemur laid the pads of its fingers on Artemis's wrist.

I have him, thought the Irish boy. The money for the expedition is mine.

Then a wall of unholy sound blasted him like a force-ten wind. Young Artemis staggered back, dropping the bag of paste, suddenly irrationally terrified.

Something wants to kill me. But what? Every animal in the world, it sounds like.

The park's residents were thoroughly spooked too. They screeched and chattered, rattling their cages, hurling themselves against the bars. Monkeys tried repeatedly to leap across the moats surrounding their islands. A thousand-pound Sumatran rhino charged the heavy doors of its cage, rattling the hinges with each attack. A red wolf snarled and snapped, an Iberian lynx hissed, slashing the air, and a snow leopard chased its tail, flicking its head and mewling anxiously.

Butler could not help but shift his focus.

"It's the female creature," he stated. "Making some kind of sound. It's riling these animals up. I'm a bit disturbed myself."

Artemis did not take his gaze from the lemur. "You know what to do," he said to his bodyguard.

Butler knew. If there is an obstacle preventing the completion of a mission, remove the obstacle. He strode quickly to the bars, poked the pistol's muzzle through the mesh, and put a dart into the female's shoulder.

She stumbled backward, her fantastic orchestra of animal sounds squawking to a halt.

Butler felt a shudder of guilt, which almost caused him to misstep on his way to Artemis's side. Twice now he had tranq'ed this girl, or whatever she was, without having any idea what the chemicals were doing to her nonhuman system. His only consolation was that he had loaded small dosage darts as soon as he had secured the night watchman. She shouldn't be out too long. A few minutes tops.

The lemur was spooked now, tiny hands tickling the space before him. The sap cocktail was

tempting, but there was danger here of the worst kind, and the urge to live was overriding the desire for a tasty treat.

“No,” said Artemis, seeing fear cloud the creature’s eyes. “It’s not real. There is no danger.”

The little simian was not convinced, as if it could read the boy’s intention in the sharp angles of his face.

The silky sifaka squeaked once as though pinpricked, then scampered along Artemis’s arm, over his shoulder, and out the cage door.

Butler lunged for the tail but missed by a hair. He closed his fingers into a fist.

“Perhaps it’s time to admit defeat on this one. We are dangerously unprepared, and our adversaries have . . . abilities we know nothing about.”

His charge’s reply was to hurry after the lemur.

“Artemis, wait,” sighed Butler. “If we must proceed, then I will take the lead.”

“They want the lemur,” Artemis panted as he ran. “And so it becomes more valuable than it was. When we catch the animal, then we are in a position of power.”

Catching the animal was easier said than done. The lemur was incredibly agile and found purchase on the smoothest of surfaces. It darted without a wobble along a metal railing, leaping fully ten feet to the lower branches of a potted palm, and from there jumped to the compound wall.

“Shoot!” hissed Artemis.

It occurred to Butler briefly that he did not care for Artemis’s expression. Almost cruel, his brow creased where a ten-year-old’s brow should not have creases. But he would worry about that later, for now he had an animal to sedate.

Butler was quick, but the silky sifaka was quicker. In a flash of fur it scaled the wall and dropped outside into the night, leaving a blurred white jet stream in its wake.

“Wow,” said Butler, almost in admiration. “That was fast.”

Artemis was not impressed by his bodyguard’s choice of words. “Wow? I think this merits more than a wow. Our quarry has escaped, and with it the funds for my Arctic expedition.”

At this point Butler was fast losing interest in the lemur. There were other less ignoble ways to raise funds. He shuddered to think of the ribbing he would have to endure if an account of this night somehow made it to Farmer’s Bar in LA, which was owned by one ex-blue-diamond bodyguard and frequented by many more.

But in spite of his distaste for the mission, Butler’s sense of loyalty forced him to share a fact that the park director had mentioned earlier, when Artemis was busy studying the alarm system.

“There is something that I know, which you may not know,” he said archly.

Artemis was not in the mood for games. “Oh, really. And what would that be?”

“Lemurs are tree creatures,” replied Butler. “That little guy is spooked, and he’s going to climb the biggest tree he can find, even if it isn’t actually a tree. If you see what I mean.”

Artemis saw immediately, which wasn’t difficult, as the huge structures cast a lattice of moonshadows over the entire compound. “Of course, old friend,” he said, his frown-crease disappearing. “The pylons.”

Things were going disastrously wrong for Artemis the elder. Mulch was injured, Holly was unconscious *again*, feet sticking out of the dwarf’s hole, and he himself was fast running out of ideas.

The deafening clamor of a hundred endangered species going berserk was not helping his concentration.

The animals are going ape, he thought. Then: *What a time to develop a sense of humor.*

All he could do was prioritize.

I need to get Holly out of here, he realized. That is the most important thing.

Mulch moaned, rolling onto his back, and Artemis saw that there was a bleeding gash on his forehead.

He stumbled to the dwarf's side. "I imagine you're in great pain," he said. "It's to be expected with such a laceration." Bedside manner was not one of Artemis's strong suits. "You will have a rather large scar, but then looks are not really important to you."

Mulch squinted at Artemis through a narrowed eye. "Are you trying to be funny? Oh my God, you're not. That was actually the nicest thing you could think of to say."

He dabbed at his bloody forehead with a finger. "Ow. That hurts."

"Of course."

"I will have to seal it. You know all about *this* dwarf talent, I suppose."

"Naturally," said Artemis, keeping a straight face. "I've seen it a dozen times."

"I doubt it," grunted Mulch, plucking a wiggling beard hair from his chin. "But I don't have much choice now, do I? With the LEP elf in dreamland, I won't be getting any magical help from that quarter."

Artemis heard a rustling in the undergrowth at the rear of the cage. "You'd better hurry it up. I think the gorilla is overcoming his fear of fairies."

Wincing, Mulch introduced the beard hair to his gash. It took off like a tadpole, poking through the skin, stitching the flaps together. Though he groaned and shuddered, Mulch managed to stay conscious.

When the hair had finished its work and the wound was tied up tighter than a fly in a ball of spiderweb, Mulch spat on his hand and rubbed the gooey mess onto the wound.

"All sealed," he proclaimed; then, upon seeing the glint in Artemis's eye, "Don't get any ideas, Mud Boy. This only works on dwarfs, and what's more, my beard hair only works on me. You poke one of my lovelies into your skin, and all you'll get is an infection."

The rustling in the undergrowth grew louder, and Artemis Fowl decided to forego further information, which for him was almost unheard of.

"Time we were off. Can you seal the tunnel behind us?"

"I can bring the whole lot down easy as pie. You'd better take the lead, though; there are better ways to go than being buried alive in . . . shall we say, recyclings. Need I say more?"

There was no need to say another syllable. Artemis jumped into the hole, grabbed Holly's shoulders, and began dragging her down the tunnel, past the blobs of luminous spittle, toward the proverbial light at the end. It was like traveling through space toward the Milky Way.

The sounds of his own body were amplified. Gulping breath, drumming heartbeat, the bend and creak of muscle and sinew.

Holly rolled along easily, her suit hissing on the rough surface like a nest of vipers. Or maybe there were snakes down here, the way Artemis's luck was going.

I am trying to do something good for a change, he reminded himself. And this is how the fates

reward me. A life of crime was infinitely easier.

Surface noise was amplified by the tunnel's acoustics. The gorilla sounded furious now. Artemis could hear the slap of fists on chest and an enraged huffing.

He realizes he has been tricked.

His theorizing was cut short by Mulch's appearance in the tunnel, the spittle bandage on his forehead casting a zombie glow on his face.

"Gorilla coming," he said as he gulped down lungfuls of air. "Gotta go."

Artemis heard twin thumps as the gorilla landed on the tunnel floor. The huge simian roared a challenge down the hole, and the noise grew in ferocity with every foot it traveled.

Holly moaned, and Artemis pulled harder on her shoulders.

Mulch sucked down air as fast as he could, bundling Artemis and Holly deeper into the tunnel. Twenty yards to go. They would never make it. The gorilla was advancing, pulverizing each spittle lantern as he passed it, roaring with bloodlust. Artemis swore he saw a flash of teeth.

The tunnel seemed to shudder with each blow. Large sections collapsed. Mud and rock clattered down on Artemis's head and shoulders. Dirt pooled in Holly's eye sockets.

Mulch's cheeks ballooned, and he opened his lips the merest fraction to speak.

"Okay," he said in a helium voice. "The tank is full."

The dwarf gathered Artemis and Holly in his burly Popeye arms and vented every bubble of air in his body. The resulting jet stream propelled the group down the length of the tunnel. The trip was short, jarring, and confusing. The breath was driven from Artemis's lungs, and his fingers were stretched to cracking, but he would not let go of Holly.

He could not let her die.

The unfortunate gorilla was blown head-over-rump by the windstorm and yanked back up the tunnel as though tethered to an elastic cable. It whooped as it went, digging its fingers into the tunnel wall.

Artemis, Holly, and Mulch popped from the tunnel mouth, bouncing and skittering along the ditch in a tangle of limbs and torsos. The stars above them were speed-streaked, and the moon was a smear of yellow light.

An old famine wall halted their progress, crumbling under the impact of three bodies.

"For more than a hundred and fifty years this wall stood," coughed Artemis. "Then we come along."

He lay on his back, feeling thoroughly defeated. His mother would die, and Holly would soon hate him when she worked out the truth.

All is lost. I have no idea what to do.

Then one of the notorious Rathdown pylons sharpened in his vision—more specifically, the figures clambering along its service ladder.

The lemur has escaped, Artemis realized. And is climbing as high as it can.

A reprieve. There was still a chance.

What I need to save this situation is a full LEP surveillance and assault kit. Perhaps I will have N°1 send one back for me.

Artemis disentangled himself from the others and decided that underneath the pillar's cornerstone would be a secure spot. He tugged off the remaining stones stacked on top, then wiggled

his fingers under the final boulder, and heaved. It came away easily, revealing nothing but worms and damp earth. No package from the future; for whatever reason that particular trick would only work once.

So. No help. I must make do with what is available.

Artemis returned to where Holly and Mulch lay. Both were moaning.

“I think I split a gut getting rid of that wind,” said Mulch. “There was a bit too much fear in the mix.”

Artemis’s nose wrinkled.

“Will you be okay?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll be plenty strong enough to carry that huge amount of gold you promised me.”

Holly was groggy. Her eyes fluttered as she tried to pull herself together, and her arms flopped like fish out of water. Artemis did a quick pulse and temperature check. Slight fever but steady heartbeat. Holly was recovering, but it would be several minutes before she could control her mind or body.

I must do this on my own, Artemis realized. No Holly, no Butler.

Just Artemis versus Artemis.

And perhaps an omnitool, he thought, reaching into Holly’s pocket.

*** The Rathdown electricity pylons had been featured in Irish news headlines several times since their erection. Environmentalists protested vehemently that the appearance of the gigantic pylons blighted an otherwise beautiful valley, not to mention the possible detrimental effect the uninsulated power lines could have on the health of anyone or anything living below their arcs. The national electricity board had countered these arguments by pleading that the lines were too high to harm anything, and that to construct smaller pylons around the valley would blight ten times more land.

And so a half dozen of these metal giants bridged Rathdown Valley, reaching a height of three hundred feet at their zenith. The pylon bases were often ringed by protesters, so much so that the power company had taken to servicing the lines by helicopter.

On this night, as Artemis raced across the moonlit meadow, kicking up diamond dewdrops, there were no protesters ringing the pylons, but they had planted their signs like moon flags. Artemis slalomed through this obstacle course while simultaneously craning his neck to track the figures above.

The lemur was on the wire now, silhouetted by the moon, scampering easily along the metal cable, while Artemis the younger and Butler were stranded on the small platform at the pylon’s base, unable to venture any farther.

Finally, thought Artemis. A stroke or two of luck.

Stroke one was that the lemur was suddenly up for grabs. Stroke the second was that while his young nemesis had chosen to follow the silky sifaka directly up the pylon the animal was scaling, he himself could go up the adjacent pole, which just happened to be the service pylon.

Artemis reached the pylon’s base, which was secured by a cage. The heavy padlock submitted instantly to a quick jab from the omnitool, as did the steel equipment locker. Inside were various tools, walkie-talkies, and a Faraday suit. Artemis tugged on the heavy overalls, wiggling his fingers into the attached gloves, tucking his long hair inside the hood. The flame-retardant and steel-thread

suit had to completely enclose him to act as a protective Faraday cage. Otherwise he could not venture out on the wires without being burned to a criminal-mastermind cinder.

More luck. An elevator platform ran along the side of the pylon. It was locked and key-coded. But locks quailed when faced with an omnitool, and a key code was of little value when it was a simple matter to unscrew the control panel and activate the pulley manually.

Artemis held tight to the safety rail as the tiny elevator shuddered and whined its way into the night sky. The valley spread out below him as he rose, and a westerly wind crept over the hills, tugging a strand of hair from his hood. Artemis gazed north, and for a fanciful moment imagined he could see the lights of Fowl Manor.

Mother is there, he thought. Unwell now and unwell in the future. Perhaps I can just talk to my younger self. Explain the situation.

This thought was even more fanciful than the last. Artemis had no illusions about what he had been like at the age of ten. He had trusted no one completely but himself. Not his parents, not even Butler. At the first mention of time travel, his younger self would have his bodyguard shoot a dart first and ask questions later. *A lot* of questions and at great length. There was no time for explanations and debate. This battle would have to be won by wits and guile.

The elevator grated into its brackets at the top of the pylon. A skull and crossbones sign was riveted to the tall safety gate. Even if Artemis had not been a genius, the sign would have been difficult to misinterpret, and just in case a total idiot did manage to scale the pylon, there was a second sign depicting a cartoon man being zapped by electricity from a cartoon pylon. The man's skeleton was clearly visible, X-ray style.

Apparently electricity is dangerous, Artemis might have commented had Butler been by his side.

There was yet another lock on the safety gate, which delayed Artemis about as long as the first two. Outside the safety gate was a small platform covered with wire mesh, with twin power lines humming directly beneath.

There are half a million volts running through those lines, thought Artemis. I do hope there are no rips in this suit.

Artemis squatted low, peering along the line. The lemur had paused halfway between the two pylons and was chattering to himself as if weighing up his options. Luckily for the small creature, it was only touching one line and so no current flowed through its body. If it put so much as a toe on the second line the shock would spin it a hundred feet into the air, and it would be stone dead before it stopped revolving.

On the far pylon, Artemis the younger scowled at the animal while simultaneously trying to tempt it back with his bag of paste.

There is nothing to do but go out on the wires and bring the lemur back yourself.

The hotsuit was equipped for moving across the wires. There was a safety cord wrapped around his waist and a lightning rod in a long pocket on his thigh. Below the platform was a small sled on insulated runners that the engineers used to hand-crank themselves between pylons.

Brains count for little now, he realized. What I need is balance.

Artemis groaned. Balance was not his forte.

Taking a deep breath, he crouched low and drew the lightning rod from his pocket. Almost as soon as it cleared the material, jets of white-hot sparks jumped from the power lines connecting with the tip of the rod. The stream buzzed and hissed like a neon snake.

You are equalizing voltage, that's all. The electricity cannot hurt you.

Perhaps not, but Artemis could already feel the hair standing on his neck. Was that anxiety, or were a couple of volts sneaking in somewhere?

Don't be absurd. If there is a hole, all the volts will worm inside, not just a couple.

Artemis was vaguely familiar with the technique for wire-walking, as the national broadcasting service had done a news special on the high-wire daredevils who risked their lives to keep the lights of Dublin burning. It wasn't so much wire-walking as wire-crawling. The cables were extremely taut, and the maintenance engineers clipped on their safety lines, lay on the sled, then turned the winch until they reached the maintenance site.

Simple. In theory. For a professional on a calm morning.

Not so easy for an amateur in the dead of night with only the stars and the ambient light of nearby Dublin to guide him.

Artemis sheathed his lightning rod and gingerly clipped his safety line to one of the cables.

He held his breath, as though that could possibly make a difference, and laid his gloved hands on the metal sled.

Still alive. A good start.

Artemis inched forward, the metal warm under his clumsy gloved hands, until he was lying flat on the sled with the double-handled winch in front of his face. It was a delicate maneuver and would have been impossible had the cables not been tethered together at regular intervals. He began to twist, and almost immediately the strain on his arms was tremendous as he moved his own bodyweight.

The gym. Butler, you were right. I'll do weights, anything, just get me off these cables with that lemur under my arm.

Artemis slid forward, feeling the runners scrape the rough metal of the cables, their intense hum setting his teeth on edge and sending constant shivers coursing along his arched spine. The wind was low, but still threatened to topple him from his lofty perch, and the ground seemed like another planet. Distant and uninviting.

Twenty feet later his arms ached, and he was noticed by the opposition.

A voice floated across from the other pylon. "I advise you to stay where you are, young man. If that suit has the tiniest rip, then one slip and those cables will liquefy your skin and melt your bones."

Artemis scowled. *Young man?* Had he really been so obnoxious? So patronizing?

"It would take less than a second for you to die," continued ten-year-old Artemis. "But that's quite long enough to be in mortal agony, don't you think? And all for nothing, as the lemur will obviously return for this treat."

Yes, he had been smug as well as obnoxious and patronizing.

Artemis chose not to reply, concentrating his energy on staying alive and enticing the silky sifaka toward him. From his considerable reservoir of knowledge on just about everything, Artemis plucked the fact that smaller simians were comforted by a purring noise. Thank you, Jane Goodall.

So he began to purr, much to the amusement of his younger self.

"Listen, Butler. There's a cat on the wire. A big tom, I would say. Perhaps you should throw him a fish."

But the mocking tone was undercut with tension. Young Artemis knew exactly what was going on.

More purring and it seemed to be working. The ghostly sifaka took a few cautious steps toward the elder Artemis, his beady black eyes glittering with starlight and perhaps curiosity.

Holly would be proud. I am talking to an animal.

Even as he purred, Artemis winced at how ludicrous the situation had become. It was a typical Fowlesque melodrama. Two parties hunting for a lemur on the highest power lines in Ireland.

Artemis looked along the dip of the lines across to the other pylon, where Butler stood, jacket tail flapping around his thighs. The bodyguard leaned into the wind, and the intensity of his stare seemed to pierce the darkness, homing in on Artemis the elder like a laser.

I miss my bodyguard, thought Artemis.

The lemur scampered closer, encouraged by the purring and perhaps fooled by the steel-gray hotsuit.

That's right. I am another lemur.

Artemis's arms were shaking from the strain of turning the handles at such an awkward angle. Every muscle in his body was stretched to its limit, including several he had never used before. His head was dizzy from keeping his balance.

All this and animal impersonations too.

One yard now. That was the distance between Artemis and the lemur. There were no more taunts from the other side now. Artemis glanced across and found that his nemesis had his eyes closed and was breathing deeply. Trying to come up with a plan.

The lemur jumped onto the sled and touched Artemis's gloved hand tentatively. Contact. Artemis stayed stock still, apart from his lips, which burbled out a comforting purr.

That's it, little fellow. Climb onto my arm.

Artemis looked into the lemur's eyes, and for perhaps the first time realized that it had emotions. There was fear in those eyes, but also a mischievous confidence.

How could I have sold you to those madmen? he wondered.

The lemur suddenly committed itself and scampered onto Artemis's shoulder. It seemed content to sit there while Artemis ferried it back to the service pylon.

As Artemis retreated, he kept his eye fixed on his younger self. He would never simply accept defeat like this. Neither of them would. Young Artemis's eyes suddenly snapped open and met his nemesis's stare.

"Shoot the animal," he said coldly.

Butler was surprised. "Shoot the monkey?"

"It's a . . . never mind. Just shoot it. The man is protected by his suit, but the lemur is an easy target."

"But the fall . . ."

"If it dies, it dies. I will not be thwarted here, Butler. If I cannot have that lemur, then no one will have it."

Butler frowned. Killing animals was not in his job description, but he knew from experience that there was no point in arguing with the young master. At any rate, it was a bit late to protest now, perched atop a pylon. He should have spoken up more forcefully earlier.

"Whenever you're ready, Butler. The target is not getting any closer."

Out on the cables, Artemis the elder could scarcely believe what he was hearing. Butler had

drawn his pistol and was climbing over the rails to get a better shot.

Artemis had not intended to speak, as interaction with his younger self could have serious repercussions for the future, but the words were out before he could stop them.

“Stay back. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

Oh, the irony.

“Ah, he speaks,” called young Artemis across the abyss. “How fortunate that we can understand each other. Well, understand this, stranger, I will have that silky sifaka or it will die. Make no mistake.”

“You must not do this. There’s too much at stake.”

“I must do it. I have no choice. Now send the animal over, or Butler will shoot.”

Through all of this, the lemur sat perched on fourteen-year-old Artemis’s head, scratching the stitching of his hood.

So the two boys who were one boy locked eyes for a long tense moment.

I would have done it, thought Artemis the elder, shocked by the cruel determination in his own blue eyes.

And so he gingerly reached up one hand and plucked the silky sifaka from his head.

“You have to go back,” he said softly. “Go back for the nice treat. And if I were you, I’d stick close to the big human. The little one isn’t very nice.”

The lemur reached out and tweaked Artemis’s nose, much as Beckett might have done, then turned and trotted along the cable toward Butler, nose sniffing the air, nostrils flaring as they located the sweet scent of Artemis’s goody bag.

In a matter of seconds it sat curled in the crook of young Artemis’s elbow, contentedly dipping its long fingers into the sap. The young boy’s face glowed with victory.

“Now,” he said, “I think it best that you stay exactly where you are until we leave. I think fifteen minutes should be fine. After that, I advise you to be on your way and count yourself fortunate that I did not have Butler sedate you. Remember the pain that you are feeling now. The ache of utter defeat and hopelessness. And if you ever consider crossing swords with me again, review your memory of this pain, and perhaps you will think twice.”

Artemis the elder was forced to watch as Butler stuffed the lemur into a duffel bag, and boy and bodyguard commenced their climb down the service ladder. Several minutes later the Bentley’s headlights scythed the darkness as the car pulled away from Rathdown Park and onto the motorway. Straight to the airport, no doubt.

Artemis reached up and gripped the winch handles. He was not beaten yet—far from it. He intended to cross swords with his ten-year-old self again just as soon as he possibly could. If anything, the boy’s mocking speech had fueled his determination.

Remember the pain? thought Artemis. I hate myself. I really do.

A BLOB OF PHLEGM

By the time Artemis had made his way down from the pylon, Holly had disappeared. He'd left her by the tunnel mouth, but there was nothing in the spot now except mud and footprints.

Footprints, he thought. Now I suppose I need to track Holly. I really must read *The Last of the Mohicans*.

"Don't bother following those," said a voice from the ditch. "False trail. I laid it in case the big human took our LEP friend along for a snack."

"That was good thinking," said Artemis, squinting through the foliage. A shaggy shadow detached itself from a hillock and became Mulch Diggums. "But why did you bother? I thought the LEP were your enemy."

Mulch pointed a stubby mud-crust-ed finger. "You are my enemy, human. You are the planet's enemy."

"And yet you are willing to help me for gold."

"A *stupendous* amount of gold," said Mulch. "And possibly some fried chicken. With barbecue sauce. And a large Pepsi. And maybe more chicken."

"Hungry?"

"Always. A dwarf can eat only so much dirt."

Artemis didn't know whether to giggle or groan. Mulch would always have trouble grasping the gravity of situations, or perhaps he liked to give that impression.

"Where's Holly?"

Mulch nodded toward a grave-shaped mound of earth.

"I buried the captain. She was moaning quite loudly.

Arty this and *Arty* that, with a few *Mothers* thrown in." *Buried? Holly is claustrophobic.*

Artemis dropped to his knees and scooped the earth from the mound with his bare hands. Mulch let him at it for a minute, then sighed dramatically.

"Let me do it, Mud Boy. You'll be there all night."

He strolled over and casually thrust his hand into the mound, chewing his lip as he searched for a specific spot.

"Here we go," grunted the dwarf, yanking out a short branch. The mound vibrated then collapsed into small heaps of pebbles and clay. Holly was underneath, unhurt.

“It’s a complex structure called a na-na,” said Mulch, brandishing the twig.

“As in ...?”

“As in ‘Na-na-ne-na-na, you can’t see me,’” said the dwarf, then slapped himself on the knee, exploding in a fit of giggles.

Artemis scowled, shaking Holly’s shoulders gently.

“Holly, can you hear me?”

Holly Short opened bleary eyes, rolled them around for a while, then focused.

“Artemis, I . . . Oh gods.”

“It’s okay. I don’t have the lemur . . . Well, actually, I do. The other me, but don’t worry, I know where I’m going.”

Holly dragged at her cheeks with delicate fingers. “I mean, *Oh gods, I think I kissed you.*”

Artemis’s head pounded, and Holly’s mismatched eyes seemed to hypnotize him. She still had a blue eye, even though her body had rejuvenated itself in the tunnel. Another paradox. But though Artemis felt hypnotized, even slightly dazed, he knew he was not *mesmerized*. There was no fairy magic here.

Artemis looked into those elfin eyes, and he knew that this younger, somehow more vulnerable Holly felt the same way, at this particular tangle of time and space, as he did.

After all we have been through. Or maybe because of it.

A memory smashed the delicate moment like a rock thrown through a spiderweb.

I lied to her.

Artemis rocked backward with the strength of the thought.

Holly believes that she infected Mother. I blackmailed her.

He knew at that instant that there was no recovering from such a brutal fact. If he confessed, she would hate him. If he did not, he would hate himself.

There must be something I can do.

Nothing came to mind.

I need to think.

Artemis took Holly’s hand and elbow, helping her to stand and step from the shallow gravelike hole.

“Reborn,” she quipped, then punched Mulch on the shoulder.

“Oww. ‘Why-for, miss, dost thou torment me?’”

“Don’t quote Gerd Flambough at me, Mulch Diggums. There was no need to bury me. A simple broadleaf across my mouth would have done.”

Mulch rubbed his shoulder. “A broadleaf desn’t have the same artistry. Anyway, do I look like a fern type of guy? I am a dwarf and we deal in mud.”

Artemis was glad of the banter. It gave him a minute to compose himself.

Forget your adolescent confusion about Holly. Remember Mother wasting away in her bed. There are less than three days left.

“Very well, troops,” he said with forced joviality. “Let’s move it out, as an old friend of mine would say. We have a lemur to catch.”

“What about my gold?” asked Mulch.

“I shall put this as simply as possible. No lemur, no gold.”

Mulch tapped his lips with eight fingers, and his beard hairs vibrated like the tendrils of a sea anemone. Thinking.

“How much is *stupendous*, exactly, in bucket terms?”

“How many buckets do you have?”

Mulch took this as a serious question. “I have a lot of buckets. Most of them are full of stuff, though. I could empty them, I suppose.”

Artemis almost gnashed his teeth. “It was a rhetorical question. A lot of buckets. As many as you like.”

“If you want me to go any farther down this monkey road, I need some kind of down payment. A good-faith deposit.”

Artemis slapped his empty pockets. He had nothing.

Holly straightened her silver wig. “I have something for you, Mulch Diggums. Something better than a stupendous amount of gold. Six numbers, which I will reveal when we get there.”

“Get where?” asked Mulch, who suspected that Holly was being melodramatic.

“The LEP equipment lockup at Tara.”

Mulch’s eyes glowed with dreams of sky-skis and dive bubbles, laser cubes and fat vacuums. The motherload. He’d been trying to crack an LEP lockup for years.

“I can have anything I want?”

“Whatever you can get onto a hovertrolley. One trolley.”

Mulch spat a marbled blob of phlegm into his palm.

“Shake on it,” he said.

Artemis and Holly looked at each other.

“It’s your lockup,” said Artemis, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “It’s your mission,” countered Holly. “I don’t know the combination.” And then the trump. “We’re here for your mother.” Artemis smiled ruefully. “You, Captain Short, are getting as bad as me,” he said, and sealed the deal with a sopping handshake.

THE FROG PRINCE

The Fowl Lear Jet, Over Belgium

Young Artemis made a video call from his PowerBook to the ancient town of Fez in Morocco. Even as he waited for the connection, Artemis silently fumed that it was necessary to make this intercontinental trip at all. Even Casablanca would have been more convenient. Morocco was hot enough without having to drive cross-country to Fez.

On screen a window popped open, barely containing the huge head of Dr. Damon Kronski, one of the most hated men in the world, but revered, too, in certain circles. Damon Kronski was the current president of the Extinctionists organization. Or as Kronski said in his most notorious interview: *The Extinctionists are not just an organization. We are a religion.* Not a statement that endeared him to the peace-loving churches of the world.

The interview had run for months on Internet news sites and was sampled every time the Extinctionists made the headlines. Artemis had viewed it himself that very morning and was repulsed by the man he was about to do business with.

I am swimming with sharks, he realized. And I am prepared to become one of them.

Damon Kronski was an enormous man, whose head began its slope into his shoulders just below the ears. Kronski's skin was translucent, redhead white with a scattershot of penny freckles, and he wore violet sunglasses that were clamped in place by the folds of his brow and cheeks. His smile was broad, shining, and insincere.

"Little Ah-temis Fowl," he said with a pronounced New Orleans drawl. "You find your daddy yet?"

Artemis gripped the armrest of his chair, squeezing dents in the leather, but his smile was as shiny and fake as Kronski's. "No. Not yet."

"Well now, that's a pity. Anything I can do to help, you be sure to let your uncle Damon know."

Artemis wondered if Kronski's amiable uncle act would fool a drunken half-wit. Perhaps it was not supposed to.

"Thank you for the offer. In a few hours we may be able to help each other."

Kronski clapped his hands delightedly. "You have located my silky sifaka."

"I have. Quite a specimen. Male. Three years old. Four feet in length from head to tail. Easily worth a hundred thousand."

Kronski feigned surprise. "A hundred? Did we really say a hundred thousand euros?"

There was steel in Artemis's eyes. "You know we did, Doctor. Plus expenses. Jet fuel is not cheap, as you are aware. I would like to hear you confirm it, or I will turn this plane around."

Kronski leaned close to the camera, his face ballooning in the screen.

"I'm generally a good judge of character, Ah-temis," he said. "I know what people are capable of. But you, I have no idea what you might do. I think it's because you haven't reached your limit yet." Kronski leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. "So, very well. One hundred thousand euros, as we agreed. But a word of warning . . ."

"Ye-es?" said Artemis, stretching the word to two syllables, in the New Orleans fashion, to demonstrate his lack of awe.

"You lose my lemur, my little silky, then you'd better be ready to cover *my* expenses. The trial is all set up, and my people don't like to be disappointed."

The word *expenses* sounded a lot more sinister when Kronski used it.

"Don't worry," snapped Artemis. "You will get your lemur. Just have my money ready."

Kronski spread his arms wide. "I've got rivers of gold here, Ah-temis. I've got mountains of diamonds. The only thing I don't have is a silky sifaka lemur. So hurry down here, boy, and make my life complete."

And he hung up a second before Artemis could click the terminate-call button.

Psychologically, that puts Kronski in the power seat, thought Artemis. I must learn to be quicker on the mouse.

He closed the PowerBook lid and reclined his chair. Outside, sunlight was burning through the lower layers of mist, and jet trails drew tic-tac-toe patterns in the sky.

Still in busy airspace. Not for long. Once we hit Africa, the jet streams will thin out considerably. I need a few hours' sleep; tomorrow will be a long and distasteful day.

He frowned. *Distasteful, yes, but necessary.*

Artemis hit the recline button and closed his eyes. Most boys his age were swapping football cards or wearing out their thumbs on game consoles. *He* was in a jet, twenty thousand feet over Europe, planning the destruction of a species with a deranged Extinctionist.

Perhaps I am too young for all this.

Age was immaterial. Without his efforts, Artemis Fowl Senior would be lost forever in Russia, and that was simply not going to happen.

Butler's voice came over the jet's intercom. "All quiet up front, Artemis. Once we get out over the Mediterranean, I'm going to put her on autopilot for an hour and try to wind down. . . ."

Artemis stared at the speaker. He could sense that Butler had more to say. Nothing but static and the beep of instruments for a moment, then . . . "Today, Artemis, when you told me to shoot the lemur, you were bluffing. You *were* bluffing, weren't you?"

"It was no bluff," said Artemis, his voice unwavering. "I will do whatever it takes."

Tara

Access to the Tara shuttleport was hindered by several steel doors, various scans and codes, tamper-proof biolocks, and a 360⁰ surveillance network at the entrance, which is not as easy to set up as it is to say. Of course, all of this could be bypassed if one knew a secret way in.

"How did you know I had a secret way in?" pouted Mulch.

In response, Artemis and Holly simply looked at him as though he were an idiot, waiting for the penny to drop.

“Stupid time travel,” muttered the dwarf. “Told you all about it myself, I suppose.”

“You will,” confirmed Holly. “And I don’t see what you’re so upset about. It’s not as if I can report you to anyone.”

“True,” admitted Mulch. “And there is all that lovely loot.”

The three sat in a stolen Mini Cooper outside the boundary fence of the McGraney farm, underneath which was concealed the Tara shuttleport. Thirty thousand cubic feet of terminal hidden by a dairy farm. The first light of dawn was diluting the darkness, and the lumpy silhouettes of grazing cows ambled across the meadow. In a year or two, Tara would become a bustling tourist hub for the fairies, but for the moment, all tourism had been suspended since the Spelltropy outbreak.

Mulch squinted at the nearest beast through the back window. “You know something, I’m a tad peckish. I couldn’t eat a whole cow, but I’d put a fair dent in one.”

“Mulch Diggums hungry. Stop the presses,” commented Artemis drily. He opened the driver’s door and stepped onto the grassy verge. A light mist clung to his face, and the clean smell of country air ran through his system like a stimulant.

“We need to get going. I have no doubt that the lemur is already twenty thousand feet in the air.”

“That’s a nimble lemur,” sniggered the dwarf. He climbed over the front seat, tumbling onto the verge.

“Nice clay,” he said, giving the ground a lick. “Tastes like profit.”

Holly stepped from the passenger seat and sideswiped Mulch’s behind with her loafer.

“There will be no profit for you if we can’t get into the terminal unseen.”

The dwarf picked himself up. “I thought we were supposed to be friends. Easy with the kicking and the punching. Are you always this aggressive?”

“Can you do it or not?”

“Of course I can. I said so, didn’t I? I’ve been running around this terminal for years. Ever since my cousin—” Artemis butted in on the conversation. “Ever since your cousin Nord, if I’m not mistaken. Ever since Nord was arrested on pollution charges, and you broke him out. We know. We know everything about you. Now, let’s move on with the plan.”

Mulch turned his back to Artemis, casually unbuttoning his bum-flap. This action was among the worst insults in a dwarf’s arsenal. Second only to what was known as the Tuba, which involves a cleaning of the pipes in someone’s direction. Wars have been fought over the Tuba.

“Moving on, chief. Stay here for fifteen minutes, then make your way to the main entrance. I would take you with me, but this tunnel is too long to hold things in, if you catch my drift.” He paused for a wink. “And if you stand too close, that’s exactly what you’ll be catching.”

Artemis smiled through gritted teeth. “Very well. Most amusing. Fifteen minutes it is, Mr. Diggums, the clock is ticking.”

“Ticking?” said Mulch. “Fairy clocks haven’t ticked for centuries.”

Then he unhinged his jaw and leaped with astonishing grace, diving into the earth like a dolphin slicing through a wave, but without the sunny disposition or cute grin.

Though Artemis had seen this a dozen times, he could not help being impressed.

“What a species,” he commented. “If they could take their minds off their stomachs for a few

minutes, they could rule the world.”

Holly climbed onto the hood of the car, rested her back against the windshield, feeling the sun on her cheeks.

“Maybe they don’t want to rule the world. Maybe that’s just you, Arty.”

Arty.

Guilt gnawed at Artemis’s stomach. He gazed at Holly’s fine familiar features and realized that he couldn’t keep lying to her any longer.

“It’s a pity we had to steal this car,” continued Holly, eyes closed. “But the note we left was clear enough. The owner should find it without a problem.”

Artemis didn’t feel so bad about the car. He had bigger nails in his coffin.

“Yes, the car,” he said absently.

I need to tell her. I have to tell her.

Artemis put a toe on the Mini’s front tire and climbed onto the hood beside Holly. He sat there for a few minutes, concentrating on the experience. Storing it away.

Holly glanced at him sitting next to her. “Sorry about earlier. You know, the thing.”

“The kiss?”

Holly closed her eyes. “Yes. I don’t know what’s happening to me. We’re not even the same species. And when we go back, we will be ourselves again.” Holly covered her face with her free hand. “Listen to me. Babbling. The LEP’s first female captain. That time stream has turned me into what you would call a teenager again.”

It was true. Holly was different: the time stream had brought them closer together.

“What if I’m stuck like this? That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?”

The question hung in the air between them. A question heavy with insecurity and hope.

If you answer this question, it will be the worst thing you have ever done.

“It wasn’t you, Holly,” Artemis blurted, his forehead hot, his calm cracked.

Holly’s smile froze, still there but puzzled. “What wasn’t me?”

“You didn’t infect my mother. I did it. It was me. I had a few sparks left over from the tunnel, and I made my parents forget I’d been missing for three years.”

Holly’s smile was gone now. “I didn’t . . . but you told me . . .” She stopped in midsentence, the truth washing across her face like a disease.

Artemis pressed on, determined to explain himself. “I had to do it, Holly. Mother is dying . . . will be dying. I needed to be certain of your help. . . . Please understand . . .”

He trailed off, realizing that there was no explaining away his actions. Artemis allowed Holly several minutes to fume, then spoke again. “If there had been another way, Holly, believe me.”

No reaction. Holly’s face was carved in stone.

“Please, Holly. Say something.”

Holly slid from the hood, her feet connecting solidly with the earth.

“Fifteen minutes are up,” she said. “Time to move out.”

She strode across the McGraney boundary without a backward glance, legs cutting twin swathes in the green-black grass. Dawn sunlight shimmered on the tip of each blade, and Holly’s passage set a surging ripple of light flashing across the meadow.

Extraordinary, thought Artemis. What have I lost?

There was nothing to do but trudge after her.

Mulch Diggums was waiting for them inside the holographic bush at the shuttleport's concealed entrance. In spite of a thick coating of mud, his smug expression was easy to read.

"You won't be needing an omnitool, Captain," he said. "I got the door open all on my lonesome."

Holly was more than surprised. The shuttleport's main door needed a twenty-digit code, plus a palm-print scan, and she knew that Mulch was about as technologically minded as a stink worm. Not that Holly wasn't relieved, as she had anticipated a thirty-minute slog resetting the log once she opened the door herself.

"So ...tell me."

Mulch pointed down the corridor toward the subterranean escalator. A small figure was spread-eagled on the ramp, his head covered in a blob of shining goo.

"Commander Root and his heavy mob have cleared out. Only one security guard left."

Holly nodded. She knew where Julius Root had gone. Back to Haven to wait for her report from Hamburg.

"The guard was on his rounds up here when I tunneled in, so I swallowed him briefly and gave him a lick of dwarf spit. Everyone reacts differently to the phlegm helmet. This little pixie tried to escape. Slapped the sensor, spouted the code, then staggered around a bit before the sedative got him."

Artemis pressed past into the access tunnel. "Perhaps our luck is finally turning," he said, certain he could feel Holly staring daggers into the back of his head.

"A pity he didn't open the lockup," sighed Mulch. "Then I could have double-crossed you two and made off with the shuttle."

Artemis froze. "Shuttle?" he braved Holly's hostile gaze to ask. "A shuttle, Holly. Do you think we could still beat my younger self to Morocco?"

Holly's eyes were flat, and her tone was neutral. "It's possible; it depends on how long it takes me to cover our tracks."

The shuttle was what LEP pilots would call a snowgood, as in *Snowgood for anything but the recycling smelter*. Butler, Artemis knew, would have been more straightforward in his assessment of the vehicle.

He could hear the big bodyguard's voice in his head. *I have driven some heaps in my time, Artemis. But this pig is ...*

"... is barely out of the Stone Age," murmured Artemis, then chuckled ruefully.

"Another joke, Mud Boy? You're really in fine form today. What is it this time? Did you tell some poor trusting fool that they caused a plague?"

Artemis hung his head wearily. This could go on for years.

Mulch had stumbled across the shuttle when he'd tunneled to the port wall and wind-blasted a sheet of metal cladding from a service tunnel wall. He knew the panel would be loose because he had utilized this point of entry on previous visits. The shuttle had been up on blocks and under a lube tent, and so Mulch could not resist a little peek. Lo and behold, a tunnel scraper in for refitting. Just the thing for hopping around the People's network of subterranean access tunnels.

It had been a simple matter for Holly to reverse the clunky shuttle back down the monorail to the

tunnel access hatch.

Meanwhile, Artemis had been covering their tracks, removing all traces of their visit to the shuttleport. Wiping video crystals and replacing the lost time with loops. There wasn't much he could do about the unconscious sprite or the loader-worth of LEP hardware they had helped themselves to from the lockup, but Mulch had no problem taking credit for those.

"Hey, I'm already public enemy number one," he had said. "It's not as if I can go any higher on the list."

So now they were seated inside the tunnel scraper, which was slotted into a launching bracket, drawing a few minutes' charge from the coupling dock before they dropped into the abyss. Holly spent the time falsifying a report for the tunnel authorities.

"I'm telling them that the shuttle paddle has been upgraded as per the service order, and the ship has been requested by the North African shuttleport to do a supply artery de-clogging. It's a drone flight, so they won't be looking for any personnel on board."

Artemis was determined to give the mission every chance of success, in spite of the bridges he had burned. So if a question had to be asked, he would ask it.

"Will that work?"

Holly shrugged. "I doubt it. There's probably a smart missile waiting for us on the other side of that door."

"Really?"

"No. I'm lying. Not nice, is it?"

Artemis shook his head miserably. He would have to think of some way to make it up to Holly. At least partially.

"Of course it will work. For now, at least. By the time Police Plaza puts all of this together, we should have returned to the future."

"And we can fly without a paddle?"

Holly and Mulch shared a guffaw and a few words in Gnommish that were too fast for Artemis to catch. He did think he heard the word *cowpóg* which translated as *moron*.

"Yes, Mud Boy. We can fly without a paddle, unless you're planning to scrape some residue from the tunnel walls. Usually we leave that to the robots."

Artemis had forgotten how cutting Holly could be with people she wasn't fond of.

Mulch sang a few bars of the old human song "You've Lost That Loving Feeling." He crooned at Holly, clutching an imaginary microphone in his fist.

Holly was not smiling now. "You're about to lose all feeling in your legs, Diggums, if you don't shut it."

Mulch noticed Holly's expression and realized that now was not the best time to be needling her.

Holly decided that it was time to terminate the conversation. She remote-opened the access hatch and withdrew the docking clamps.

"Buckle up, boys," she said, and dropped the small craft into a steep dive, down an enormous hole, like dropping a peanut into the mouth of a hungry hippo.

A FOWL MOOD

Fez, Morocco

Ten-year-old Artemis was about as miserable as Butler could remember seeing him, except for perhaps the time he had lost a science prize to an Australian postgraduate. The bodyguard glanced in the mirror of the rented Land Rover and saw that his young charge was sitting in a puddle of perspiration, his expensive suit virtually dissolving on his spare frame.

He's in a Fowl mood, thought Butler, in a rare moment of wit.

A perforated box sat belted on the seat beside Artemis. Three black fingers poked from one of the holes, as the captured lemur explored his prison.

Artemis has barely looked at the creature. He is trying to objectify it. It is no small thing to cause the extinction of a species, even to save one's father.

Artemis, meanwhile, was cataloging the causes of his misery. A missing father and a mother teetering on the brink of nervous collapse were numbers one and two. Followed by a team of Arctic explorers running up expenses in a Moscow hotel room, doubtless living on room service—caviar with everything. Damon Kronski figured high on the list too. A repulsive man with repellant ideals.

The local airport, Fez Saïss, had been closed, and so Butler had been forced to detour the Lear to Mohammed V International in Casablanca and rent a Land Rover there. And not a modern Land Rover either. This one belonged in the last millennium and had more holes than a block of Gruyère cheese. The air-conditioning had spluttered its last more than a hundred miles ago, and the seat padding had worn so thin that Artemis felt like he was sitting on a jackhammer. If the heat didn't bake him, the vibration would shake him to death.

Still, in spite of all these things, a thought struck Artemis, causing the corner of his mouth to twitch into a half smile.

That strange creature and her human companion were utterly fascinating.

They were desperate to have this lemur, and they would not give up. He was certain of it.

Artemis turned his attention to the city suburbs bouncing past his window. The desert highway was suddenly thick with traffic as they neared the city center. Giant trucks thundered past, tires taller than a grown man, their flatbeds stuffed with sullen human cargo. Harried donkey hooves clicked on the broken asphalt, their backs piled high with sticks, laundry, or even furniture. Thousands of dusty mopeds slalomed through the lanes, often bearing entire families on their rusting frames. The roadside buildings shimmered in the late-afternoon sun like mirages. Ghost houses with tea-drinking specters

seated out at the front.

Closer to the town center the buildings were denser with no tracts of desert in between. Dwellings were interspersed with garages and video stores, tea shops and pizza parlors. All were the same sandblasted orange color, with patches of original paint poking through below the lintels.

Artemis felt, as he always did when visiting developing nations, mild surprise at the coexistence of ancient and modern. Goat herders toted iPods on spangled chains and wore Manchester United shirts. Shacks had satellite dishes bolted to their corrugated roofs.

Until recent times, Fez had been a place of real importance, being the depot for the caravan trade from the south and east. It was known as a center of Arab wisdom, a holy city, and a place of pilgrimage when the route to Mecca was closed by weather conditions or overrun with bandits.

Now it had become a place where outlawed Extinctionists did deals with desperate Irish criminals.

The world is changing more rapidly now than it ever has before, thought Artemis. And I am helping to change it for the worse.

Not a comforting thought, but comfort was not a luxury he expected to enjoy in the near future.

Artemis's cell phone buzzed as an incoming text message arrived, having made its way from Fez to Ireland and back to Morocco.

He checked the screen, and a mirthless smile exposed his incisors.

The leather souk. Two hours, read the message.

Kronski wished to make the exchange in a public place.

Apparently the doctor trusts me about as much as I trust him.

Smart man.

Holly piloted the shuttle as though she were angry with it, slamming the mining craft around bends until its air brakes screamed and its readout needles shot into the red. She wore a flight helmet hardwired directly into the shuttle's cameras, so a wraparound view of the shuttle was available to her at all times; she could even choose a remote view beamed to the shuttle from the tunnel's various cameras. This particular stretch of tunnel saw little traffic, and so the motion-sensitive lights would pop on barely ten yards before the shuttle entered a stretch.

Holly tried hard to enjoy the experience of flying and forget everything else. Being a pilot for the LEP was what she had dreamed of since childhood. As she cut yet another corner with inches to spare, and she felt the shuttle strain to its limits in her hands, the tension drained from her body as though absorbed by the craft.

Artemis lied to me and blackmailed me, but he did it for his mother. A good reason. Who's to say that I would not have done the same thing myself? If I could have saved my mother, I would have done whatever I needed to do, including manipulate my friends.

She could understand what Artemis had done—even though she felt it was unnecessary—but that did not mean she could forgive him just yet.

And how could she forget it? It felt as though she had completely misjudged their friendship.

That won't happen again.

One thing that Holly was certain of—the most she and Artemis could ever have now was what they had always had: grudging respect.

Holly patched into the passenger-seat bubble-cam on the shuttle ceiling and was gratified to see

Artemis clutching the armrests on his seat. Perhaps it was the camera feed, perhaps his face was actually green.

You blew it, Mud Boy, thought Holly, and then: *I hope it's your face and not the feed.*

There was a natural vent in the Moroccan desert south of Agadir, where tunnel gas filtered up through a foot of sand. The only evidence of this was a slight coloration of the sand above the vent, which was quickly dispersed by the winds as soon as the sand reached the surface. Nevertheless, a thousand years of the process had left the dunes with curious red streaks, which the local villagers swore was blood from the victims of Raisuli, a famous twentieth-century bandit. It was highly unlikely that anyone swallowed these claims, least of all the villagers themselves, but it made good reading in the guidebooks and drew visitors to the otherwise unremarkable area.

Holly drilled the craft through the vent, sealing the shuttle's own air filters against the tiny sand particles. She was flying virtually blind with only a three-dimensional model of the vent to navigate by. Luckily it was a short leg of the trip and it took mere seconds for the shuttle to punch through to the African sky. In spite of the craft's insulated skin, its passengers soon began to feel the heat. Especially Mulch Diggums. Unlike the other fairy families, dwarfs were not surface creatures and did not dream of golden sun on their upturned faces. Anything higher than sea level gave them vertigo.

Mulch burped wetly. "This is too high. I don't like this. Hot, too darned hot. I need to go to the bathroom. For what, I'm not sure exactly. Just don't follow me in there. Whatever you hear, don't come in."

When a dwarf gave this sort of advice, it was wise not to ignore it.

Holly sent a charge through the windshield to clear it, then pointed the shuttle's nose northeast toward Fez. With a bit of luck, they could still beat little Artemis to the rendezvous point.

She set the autopilot and swiveled her seat to face Artemis, whose face was just returning to its normal pallor.

"You're sure about the rendezvous point?" she asked.

Artemis wasn't sure about anything, and this uncertainty fogged his brain.

"Not sure, Holly. But I clearly remember making the exchange at the souk in Fez. At the very least it is a place to start. If Kronski and my younger self do not show up, then we proceed to the Extinctionists' compound."

Holly frowned. "Hmm. This scheme is not up to your usual standards, and our time is running out. We don't have a couple of days to play around with. Time is the enemy."

"Yes," agreed Artemis. "Time is the crux of this entire misadventure."

Holly took a nutri-bar from the tiny refrigerator and returned to her controls.

Artemis studied his friend's back, trying to read her body language. Hunched, rounded shoulders, and arms crossed in front of her body. She was cutting herself off, hostile to communication. He needed to produce some masterstroke to get himself back into her good books.

Artemis pressed his nose to the porthole, watching the Moroccan desert flash past in streaks of ocher and gold. There must be something that Holly wanted. Something she regretted not doing, that in some way he could facilitate.

After a moment's concentrated thought, it came to him. Hadn't he seen a field holograph pack on one of the storage rails? And wasn't there someone to whom Holly had never said good-bye?

Police Plaza, Haven City, The Lower Elements

Commander Julius Root was up to the quivering tip of his fungus cigar in paperwork. Not that it was actual paperwork. There hadn't been any LEP files written on real paper in a centaur's age. It was all saved on a crystal and kept in a central core somewhere in info-space, and apparently now Foaly's people were trying to grow memory plants, which meant that someday information could be stored in plants or dung heaps, or even the cigar sticking out of Root's mouth. The commander did not understand any of this, nor did he want to. Let Foaly have the worlds of nano and cyber technologies. He would take the world of everyday LEP problems. And there were plenty of those.

First, his old enemy Mulch Diggums was running riot aboveground. It was almost as if the dwarf were taunting him. His latest crime spree involved breaking into shuttleports, then selling his booty to exiled fairies living among the humans. At each site he would leave a nice pyramid of recycled earth in the middle of the floor, like a calling card.

Then there were those blasted swear toads. A couple of college graduate warlocks had granted the power of speech to the common bloated tunnel toad. Naturally, being college graduates, they had only granted the toads the power of bad language. Now, thanks to an unforeseen side effect, namely fertility, there was a virtual epidemic of these toads running around Haven, offending every citizen they hopped into.

The goblin gangs were growing in strength and audacity. Only last week they had fireballed a patrol car on its route through a goblin town.

Julius Root leaned back in his swivel chair, allowing the smoke from his cigar to form a cloud around his head. There were days when he felt like hanging up his holster for good. Days when it felt as though there was nothing to keep him in the job.

The hologram ring buzzed on the ceiling like a disco ball. Incoming call. Root checked the caller ID.

Captain Holly Short.

Root allowed himself a rare grin.

Then there were days when he knew exactly what he had to do.

I have to groom the best people to take over when I am gone.

People like Captain Kelp, Foaly—gods help me—and Captain Holly Short.

Root had handpicked Holly from the ranks. Promoted her to captain, the first woman in the LEP's history. And she had done him proud. Every recon so far had been successful, without a single mind-wipe or time stop.

She's the one, Julius, said Root's inner voice. *Smart, fearless, compassionate. Holly Short will make a splendid captain. Who knows, maybe a great commander.*

Root wiped the smile from his face. Captain Short did not need to see him smiling proudly like a doting grandfather. She needed discipline, order, and a healthy dollop of respect/fear for her commanding officer.

He tapped the accept pad on his desktop screen, and the hologram ring blasted a Milky Way of stars from its projectors, which swirled and solidified into the flickering form of Captain Holly Short wearing a human suit. Undercover, obviously. He could see her exactly as she was, but she could not see him until he stepped into the footprint of the holographic ring, which he did.

“Captain Short, all is well in Hamburg, I trust?”

Holly seemed speechless for a moment; her mouth hung open and her hands reached out as if to touch the commander. In her time he was dead, murdered by Opal Koboi, but here and now Julius

Root was as vital as she remembered.

Root cleared his throat. "All is well, Captain?"

"Yes. Of course, Commander. All is well, for the moment. Though it might be an idea to have Retrieval on standby."

Root dismissed this idea with a wave of his cigar. "Nonsense. Your record so far speaks for itself. You have never needed backup before."

Holly smiled. "Always a first time."

Root blinked. Something on the hologram ring's floating gaseous readout had caught his eye.

"Are you calling me from Africa? What are you doing in Africa?"

Holly slapped her palm against the instrument panel on her end. "No, I'm in Hamburg, in the observation hide. Stupid machine. The projectors are all wrong too. I look about ten years old on the monitor. I'm going to strangle Foaly when I get back."

Root couldn't help but smile at that, but he tucked it away quickly.

"Why the hologram, Short? What's wrong with a plain old communicator? Do you know how expensive it is to beam sound and vision through the earth's crust?"

Holly's image flickered and stared at its feet, then up again.

"I . . . I just wanted to thank you, Jul . . . Commander."

Root was surprised. *Thank him.* For months of impossible tasks and double shifts.

"Thank me, Captain? This is most irregular. I'm not sure I'm doing my job right if fairies are thanking me."

"Yes, yes you are," blurted Holly's image. "You do a fine job, more than fine. No one appreciated . . . appreciates you enough. But I do now. I know what you were . . . are trying to do for me. So thank you, and I won't let you down."

Root was surprised to find that he was actually touched. It wasn't every day he was faced with such genuine emotion.

Look at me, he thought. Blubbering at a hologram. Wouldn't Foaly love this.

"I . . . 'hem . . . I accept your thanks, and I believe them to be heartfelt. Although I don't expect an expensive hologram call during every mission; just the once will be fine."

"Understood, Commander."

"And be careful in Hamburg. Make sure to check your equipment."

"I will, Commander," said Holly, and Root could have sworn she rolled her eyes, but it could have been another glitch in the program.

"Anything else, Captain?"

Holly reached out her hand; it shimmered and wavered slightly with the motion. Root was not sure what he was supposed to do. Hologram etiquette was very clear: hugging and shaking were not encouraged. After all, who wants to embrace a pixellated image?

But still the hand was there.

"Wish me luck, Commander. One officer to another."

Root grunted. With any other subordinate he would have suspected toadying, but Captain Short had always impressed him with her candor.

He reached out his hand and felt a slight tingle as it touched Holly's virtual digits.

“Good luck, Captain,” he said gruffly. “And try to tone down that maverick streak. Someday I won’t be around to help you.”

“Will do, Commander. Good-bye,” said Holly, and then she was gone. But in the seconds before her holographic image fizzled out, Julius Root could have sworn he saw rough holographic tears glint on her cheeks.

Stupid machine, he thought. I will demand that Foaly recalibrate the lot of them.

Holly stepped out of the holo-booth, which resembled an ancient shower unit with a rubber curtain. With the touch of a button it collapsed and self-sealed into the portable briefcase.

There were tears in her eyes as she strapped herself into the pilot’s chair and flicked off the autopilot.

Artemis squirmed slightly in the copilot’s chair.

“So, are we even?”

Holly nodded. “Yes. We’re even. But your elf-kissing days are over.”

“I see,” said Artemis.

“It’s not a challenge, Artemis. Over is over.”

“I know,” said Artemis neutrally.

The sat in silence for a while, watching low mountains speed across the desert toward them, then Holly leaned across and punched Artemis gently on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Arty.”

“You are most welcome. All I did was have an idea.”

Mulch emerged noisily from the bathroom, scratching and grunting.

“*Wooo-oh*, that’s better. Thank the gods for soundproofing, eh?”

Holly winced. “Close the door and let the extractor fan do its work.”

Mulch slammed the door with a flick of his heel. “I was thinking in there, you know, roo-minating.”

“I don’t think I want to hear this.”

Mulch plowed on, regardless. “That little lemur. The silky whatever. You know who he reminds me of with that buzz-cut hairdo?”

They had all been thinking it.

“Commander Root,” said Holly, smiling.

“Yep. A miniature Commander Root.”

“Julius Junior,” said Artemis.

They crested the Atlas mountain foothills, and Fez was revealed like the heart of the land, its arteries clogged with vehicles.

“Jayjay,” said Holly. “That’s his name. Now, let’s go get him.”

She switched on the shuttle’s shield and initiated their descent into Fez.

PIGEON DROPPINGS

The Leather Souk, Fez Medina

Holly inflated a cham-pod and suckered it to the shadowy underside of the stone balcony overlooking Fez's leather souk. When the coast was clear, she and Artemis climbed through the tiny access port, wiggling into the blow-up seats. Artemis's knees knocked against his chin, clicking his teeth.

"Like I said, you're getting tall," said Holly.

Artemis blew a raven lock from his eye. "And hairy."

"Your hair was the only thing that stopped little Arty from recognizing himself, so be glad of it."

Holly had liberated the cham-pod duffel bag from the Tara lockup along with a single Neutrino handgun and suitable disguises. Artemis wore a knee-length brown shirt and thong sandals, while Holly's fairy characteristics were hidden by an abaya and head scarf.

The cham-pod was an old portable model and was basically a ball with a transparent outer layer that was inflated by a tank of chromo-variable gas, which could change color to imitate the background. That was about as high-tech as it got. No directional equipment, no on-board weaponry, just a one-way touch screen and two cramped seats.

"No air filters?" wondered Artemis.

"Unfortunately not," said Holly, pulling her scarf across her nose. "What is that smell?"

"Diluted pigeon droppings," replied Artemis. "It's highly acidic and, of course, plentiful. The tannery workers use it to soften the hides before dyeing them."

The leather souk spread out below them was a spectacular sight. Huge stone vats were arranged across the courtyard in honeycomb patterns, each filled with either vegetable dyes such as saffron or henna, or acidic softeners. The leather workers stood in the dye vats, thoroughly soaking each skin, including their own, and when the hide had attained the desired hue, it was stretched on a nearby rooftop to dry.

"People say that Henry Ford invented the production line," said Artemis. "This place has been going for six hundred years."

The souk was enclosed by high walls painted white but mottled by dye and dust. Ocher stains spread across the ancient brick like the faded map of some exotic archipelago.

"Why did Kronski choose the souk?" wondered Holly. "The stink is almost unbearable, and I say that as a friend of Mulch Diggums."

“Since birth Kronski has suffered from anosmia,” Artemis explained. “He has no sense of smell. It amuses him to conduct his business here, as whoever he happens to be meeting will be virtually assaulted by the smell from the acid vats. Their concentration is shattered and his is unaffected.”

“Clever.”

“Fiendishly. The area is a tourist attraction, so many people will pass through, but none hang around for too long.”

“So plenty of spectators but not many witnesses.”

“Apart from the locals, and Kronski doubtless has a dozen of those on his payroll who will see what he wants them to see.” Artemis leaned forward, his nose brushing the plastic portal. “And here is our fiendish Extinctionist now. Right on cue.”

The souk below was thronged with leather workers and merchants, long since inured to the sharp odor of the vats. Groups of die-hard tourists flitted through, determined to capture the scene on their cameras but unwilling to suffer the heat and smells for longer than a few shutter clicks.

And among them all, serene and smiling, strode Dr. Damon Kronski, dressed in a preposterous tailored camouflage suit, complete with a general’s peaked hat.

Holly was sickened by the man and how obviously he relished his surroundings.

“Look at him. He loves this.”

Artemis did not comment. He had sold the lemur and judged that to be a crime worse than Kronski’s. Instead he searched the souk for a smaller version of himself.

“There I am. West corner.”

Holly switched her gaze to locate young Artemis. He stood almost hidden by a huge tiled urn brimming with mint-green dye. The sinking sun was a chopped silver disk on its surface.

Artemis smiled. *I remember standing in that exact spot so the glare would distract Kronski. It is the only vat touched by the sun at this time. A little payback for the smell. Childish, perhaps, but then, I was a child.*

“It looks like your memory is accurate on this occasion,” said Holly.

Artemis couldn’t help but be relieved. His recollection had been hit-and-miss up to now.

He straightened suddenly. *Hit-and-miss. How could I not have seen it? These memory malfunctions could only mean one thing.*

No time to pursue that thought now. The exchange was afoot.

Artemis tapped the touch screen with his index finger, expanding a section and closing in on a plinth at the center of the souk. The low table stone was grooved and curved from centuries of being piled high with hides. Wet henna glistened on its surface and dribbled down its sides like blood from a head injury.

“There,” said Artemis. “That’s where we agreed to make the exchange. Kronski lays the suitcase on the rock. I hand it over.”

“*Him*. The lemur is a male, and his name is Jayjay,” said Holly, making it real.

“I hand over Jayjay. Then we go our separate ways, simple as that. There were no complications.”

“Perhaps we should wait until after the handoff?”

“No. What happens afterward is an unknown quantity. At least now we have some foreknowledge.”

Holly studied the scene with a veteran’s eye. “Where’s Butler?”

Artemis touched another point on the screen. It rippled slightly, flexed, and enlarged his selection.

“In that window. Watching over everything.”

The window was a high rectangle in the flaking white wall, painted black by shade and depth.

“You think you’re invisible, don’t you, my friend,” Holly whispered, then highlighted the window with a thumb and activated a night-vision filter. In the sudden glow of body heat, a hulking figure appeared in the window, still as stone except for a beating heart.

“I remember that Butler wanted to make the exchange, but I talked him out of it. He’s up there right now, fuming.”

“Butler fuming is not something I want to see up close.”

Artemis laid a hand on her shoulder. “Then don’t get too close. A distraction is all we need. I wish there had been an LEP jumpsuit in that lockup. If you were invisible to man *and* machine, I would be more comfortable with this.”

Holly twisted her chin, calling her magic, and blobs of her disappeared until there was nothing left in the seat but haze.

“Don’t worry, Artemis,” she said, her voice sounding almost robotic because of the vibration. “I have been on missions before. You are not the only smart one in the souk.”

Artemis was not in the least cheered by this. “All the more reason to be careful. I wish there’d been a set of wings in the terminal. What sort of lockup doesn’t have wings?”

“Potluck,” said Holly, her voice floating through the expandable seal that operated as a doorway. “We got what we got.”

“We got what we got,” repeated Artemis, following Holly’s progress down the steps and across the courtyard with the infrared filter. “Terrible grammar.”

* * *

Ten-year-old Artemis felt as though he had been dipped in a jar of honey and left to bake on the surface of the sun. His garments had molded themselves to his skin, and a tornado of flies revolved around his head. Artemis’s throat was sandpaper dry, and he could hear his breath and pulse as though he were wearing a helmet.

And the stench. The stench was a hot wind gusting in his nose and eyes.

I must persevere, he thought with a focused determination beyond his years. Father needs me. Also, I refuse to be cowed by this odious man.

The souk was a confusing kaleidoscope of pumping limbs, splashing dye, and evening shadows. And from Artemis’s point of view, things were even more confusing. Elbows flashed past, urns rang like bells, and the air was shattered by sharp bolts of French and Arabic above his head.

Artemis allowed himself a moment to meditate. He closed his eyes and took shallow breaths through his mouth.

Very well, he thought. To business, Dr. Kronski.

Luckily the doctor was enormous, and as Artemis made his way through the souk, he quickly spotted Kronski on the opposite diagonal.

Look at that poser. A camouflage suit! Does he honestly believe himself a general in some war against the animal kingdom?

Artemis himself drew surprised stares from the locals. Tourists were not unusual in the souk, but lone ten-year-old boys in formal suits, carrying monkey cages, were rare in any part of the world.

It is a simple matter. Walk to the center and set down the cage.

But even walking through the souk was not simple. Workers bustled through the lanes between vats, laden with dozens of sopping hides. Strings of dye flew through the air, striping the clothes of tourists and other workers. Artemis was forced to tread carefully and give way several times before he eventually reached the small clearing at the center.

Kronski was there before him, perched on the tiny stool that folded out from the top of his hunting cane, puffing on a thin cigar.

“Apparently I’m missing out on half the experience,” he said, as though they were simply continuing a conversation. “The best part of a cigar is the aroma, and I can’t smell a thing.”

Artemis was silently infuriated. The man looked completely comfortable, with barely a drop of sweat on his brow. He forced himself to smile.

“Do you have the money, Damon?” At least he could annoy the good doctor by neglecting his title.

Kronski did not seem annoyed. “Got it right here, Ahtemis,” he said, patting his breast pocket. “A hundred thousand is such a trifling amount, I managed to stuff every last note into my suit pocket.”

Artemis could not resist a jibe. “And what a lovely suit it is.”

Kronski’s violet-colored glasses flashed in the last rays of the sun. “Unlike your own, my boy, which appears to be losing its *character* in this heat.”

It was true, Artemis felt that the only thing holding him upright was the dried sweat on his spine. He was hungry, tired, and irritable.

Focus. The end justifies the sacrifices.

“Well, obviously I have the lemur, so can we please proceed.”

Kronski’s fingers twitched, and Artemis could guess what he was thinking: *Take the lemur from the boy. Just grab it. No need to part with the hundred thousand.*

Artemis decided to nip this kind of thinking in the bud. “In case you’re entertaining any rash notions of renegeing on our agreement, let me just say one word to you: *Butler.*”

One word was enough. Kronski knew Butler’s reputation but not his whereabouts. His fingers twitched once more, and then were still.

“Very well, Ah-temis. Let’s get this business over with. I’m sure you appreciate that I need to inspect the merchandise.”

“Of course. And I’m sure that *you* appreciate that I will need to see a sample of your currency.”

“Why, of course.” Kronski wiggled his hand into a pocket and withdrew a fat envelope brimming with purple five hundred euro notes. He carelessly selected one and passed it across to Artemis.

“Gonna smell it, are you, Ah-temis?”

“Not exactly.” Artemis flipped open his cell phone and selected a UV and magnetic currency scanner from its augmented menu. He passed the note in front on the purple light, checking for the watermark and metal strip.

Kronski pressed a hand to his heart. “I am wounded, boy, injured, that you think I would cheat you. Why, it would cost more than a hundred thousand to forge a hundred thousand. A good set of plates cost twice that.”

Artemis closed the phone. "I am not a trusting person, Damon. You'll learn that about me." He placed the cage on the stone plinth. "Now, your turn."

In that moment, Kronski's entire attitude changed. His offhand nature vanished, to be replaced with a giddiness. He smiled and tittered, tiptoeing to the cage like a child to a Christmas tree.

Perhaps a normal child, thought Artemis sourly. Christmas morning held no surprises for me, thanks to the X-ray scanner on my cell phone.

Obviously the prospect of extinguishing the life's spark of another species excited Kronski hugely. He leaned over the cage daintily, squinting through the airholes.

"Yes, yes. All *appears* to be in order. But I will need to take a closer look."

"A hundred thousand euros buys you all the closer looks you need."

Kronski tossed the envelope to Artemis. "Oh, take it, you tiresome boy. You really distress me, Ah-temis. A boy like you can't have many friends."

"I've got one friend," retorted Artemis, pocketing the money. "And he's bigger than you."

Kronski opened the box just enough to grab the lemur by the scruff of the neck. He hoisted the animal aloft like a trophy, checking him from all angles.

Artemis took a step back, casting suspicious glances around the souk.

Perhaps nothing is going to happen, he thought. Perhaps those creatures were not as resourceful as I believed. I may have to be content with the hundred thousand for now.

And then the resourceful creatures arrived.

Holly did not have wings to fly, but that did not mean she couldn't cause havoc. There had been no weapons in the LEP lockup beyond the single Neutrino, but there had been some mining equipment, including a few dozen blaster buttons, which Holly was now sprinkling into the unattended dye vats around the souk, with a double helping underneath Butler's window.

Though she was invisible, Holly took extra care with her movements, as shielding without a suit was wild magic indeed. Any sudden gestures or collisions could cause her body to vent magical fireworks, which would look strange igniting out of thin air.

So—softly, softly was the way to move.

Holly dropped the last of the buttons, feeling totally vulnerable in spite of her invisibility.

I miss Foaly's guidance, she thought. It's nice to have an all-seeing eye.

As if he could read her mind, Artemis's voice came from the mike-bud in her ear. Another gift from the lockup.

"Kronski is opening the cage. Get ready to blow the buttons."

"All set. I'm at the northwest corner if Jayjay tries to run."

"I see you on the filter. Detonate at will."

Holly climbed into an empty vat and fixed her gaze on Kronski. He had the lemur out now, holding it away from his body. Perfect.

She ran a finger along the small strip in her hand until all the tiny lights had turned green. A one word message scrolled across the strip: *Detonate?*

Absolutely, thought Holly, and pressed the YES box.

A vat blew, sending a column of red dye shooting twenty feet into the air. Several more vats quickly followed suit, thumping like mortars, hurling their contents into the Moroccan sky.

A symphony of color, thought Artemis from his perch. Butler's view is totally obscured.

Below in the souk, pandemonium was instantaneous. The leather workers roared and shouted, oohing like spectators at a fireworks show as each new colored fountain erupted. Some realized that their precious leathers were being coated with the wrong hues and began to feverishly gather their wares and tools. Within seconds it was raining goutts of dye, and the spaces between the vats were thronged with frantic workers and spooked tourists.

Young Artemis stood stock still, ignoring the flying dye, his gaze fixed on Damon Kronski and the lemur in his fist.

Watch the animal. They want the animal.

Kronski squealed with each explosion, balancing on a single leg like a scared ballet dancer.

Priceless, thought Artemis, and shot a few seconds of video on his phone. Something else was about to happen, he felt sure of it.

And he was right. Artemis had a vague impression that the earth exploded in front of Kronski's feet. Mud mushroomed upward, something moved in the curtain of earth, and then the lemur was gone.

Dr. Kronski was left holding a blob of slime, which glowed slightly in the evening shadows.

The last drops of dye fell, and slowly the chaos retreated. The leatherworkers shook their heads in wonder, then began to curse their luck. A day's profit gone.

Kronski squealed for several seconds after the dust had cleared, holding the note like an opera singer.

Artemis grinned nastily. "It isn't over until the fat lady sings, so I suppose it's over."

The doctor was snapped out of it by Artemis's tone. He composed himself, standing on two feet and breathing deeply as the red spots retreated from his cheeks. It was not until he tried to wipe the gunk from his hand that he realized the lemur was no longer in his grasp. As he stared in disbelief at his fingers, Kronski felt the stuff coating his fingers harden into a glowing gauntlet.

"What have you done, Artemis?"

Ah, thought Artemis. Suddenly you can pronounce my name.

"I have done nothing, Damon. I delivered the lemur, you lost him. The problems here are all yours."

Kronski was livid; he tore off his glasses to reveal red-rimmed eyes. "You have tricked me, Fowl. Somehow you are a participant in this. I cannot host an Extinctionist conference without a strong opening. The execution of that lemur was my big 'Hello, everyone.'"

Artemis's phone beeped, and he glanced at the screen. A brief text from Butler.

Mission accomplished.

He pocketed the cell phone and smiled broadly at Kronski.

"A strong opening. I may be able to help you with that. For a price, naturally."

Artemis the elder sat in the cham-pod watching events unfurling below. Everything had gone exactly to plan, with the exception of the dye vats, which actually exceeded Artemis's expectations.

Butler's view is completely blocked, he thought. And then he froze suddenly. Of course! I wouldn't have placed Butler in that window at all. I would have put a decoy there, as it is one of the five logical places for a sniper to set up. In fact, I would have put a decoy in all five spots and then had

Butler hide himself somewhere on the souk floor, ready to step in if those pesky lemur-nappers showed up again, which they very well could, as they seem to know my every move. I, Artemis Fowl, have been bamboozled by myself.

Suddenly, a horrifying thought struck him.

“Holly!” he shouted into the microphone pad adhered to his thumb. “Abort! Abort!”

“What . . .” came the crackly response. “The noise . . . I think . . . damaged.”

Then a few seconds of white noise, sharp snaps, and silence.

It was too late. Artemis could only press his face against the screen and watch helplessly as one of the leatherworkers shrugged off his shoulder blanket and straightened, revealing himself to be far taller than he had previously appeared. It was, of course, Butler, with a handheld infrared scanner extended before him.

Butler. Don't do it, old friend. I know you were never comfortable with my schemes.

In three quick strides the bodyguard moved to Holly's vat and netted the elf in his blanket. She struggled and fought, but never had a chance against Butler's formidable strength. In ten seconds Holly was hog-tied and hoisted over the bodyguard's shoulder. In five more seconds Butler was out of the gate and lost in the gathering crowds of the medina.

It all happened so quickly that Artemis's jaw did not have time to drop. One moment he was in control, enjoying the smugness that comes with being the smartest person in the metaphorical room. The next he was crashing back to earth, having sacrificed his queen for a rook, realizing he was up against somebody just as smart as he was, only twice as ruthless.

He felt the pallor of desperation creep across his forehead, leaving pins and needles in its wake.

They have Holly. The Extinctionists will put her on trial on charges of breathing human air.

A thought occurred to him: Every defendant is entitled to a good lawyer.

GONE FOREVER

La Domaine des Hommes, Extinctionists' Compound, Fez

Artemis the younger agreed to accompany Dr. Kronski to his gated compound near the medina. Kronski's Land Rover was considerably more luxurious than Artemis's rented model, complete with powerful air-conditioning, water cooler, and white tiger upholstery.

Artemis ran a finger through the fur and was not surprised to find that it was real.

"Nice seats," he commented drily.

Kronski did not answer. He hadn't spoken much since losing the lemur, except to mutter to himself, cursing the unfairness of it all. It didn't seem to bother him that his suit was covered in dye, which was transferring itself to his expensive upholstery.

Though it took barely five minutes to reach the compound, Artemis was glad of the thinking space. By the time the Land Rover was cleared through the reinforced gates, he had any wrinkles in his strategy straightened out, and he'd used the spare two minutes to plot one of the romance novels he occasionally wrote under the pseudonym Violet Tsirblou.

A guard with bulk to match Butler's waved them through, underneath a walkway arch in the twelve-foot wall. Artemis kept his eyes open on the way in, noting the armed guards patrolling the ten-acre compound, and the position of the generator hut, and the staff quarters.

Information is power.

The residential chalets were built in the style of Californian beach houses, flat roofs, and plenty of glass, clustered around a man-made beach, complete with a wave machine and lifeguard. There was a large conference center in the middle of the compound, with a scaffold-clad spire jutting from its roof. Two men were perched on the scaffolding, putting the finishing touches to a brass icon on the spire's tip. And even though most of the icon was wrapped in canvas, Artemis could see enough to know what it was. A human arm with the world in its fist. The symbol of the Extinctionists.

Kronski's driver parked in front of the compound's grandest chalet, and the doctor led the way inside wordlessly. He flapped a hand toward a hide-covered sofa, and disappeared into his bedroom.

Artemis was hoping for a shower and a change of clothes, but apparently Kronski was too upset for courtesy, so Artemis was forced to tug at the collar of his itchy shirt and wait for his host's return.

Kronski's reception lounge was a macabre space. One wall was covered with certificates of extinction, complete with photographs of the unfortunate animals and the dates on which the Extinctionists managed to murder the last one of the particular species.

Artemis browsed the photo wall. Here was a Japanese sea lion and a Yangtze river dolphin. A Guam flying fox and a Bali tiger.

All gone forever.

The only way to see these creatures would be to somehow build up enough momentum to travel faster than the speed of light and go back in time.

There were further horrors in the room, all labeled for educational purposes. The sofa was upholstered with the pelts of Falkland Island wolves. The base of a standing lamp was fashioned from the skull of a western black rhinoceros.

Artemis struggled to maintain his composure.

I need to get out of here as quickly as possible.

But the faint voice of his conscience reminded him that leaving this place would not mean that it no longer existed, and selling the strange creature to Kronski would only draw more people to it.

Artemis conjured a picture of his father in his mind.

Whatever it takes. Whatever I have to do.

Kronski entered the room, showered and wearing a flowing kaftan, his eyes red rimmed as though he'd been crying.

"Sit down, Ah-temis," he said, gesturing toward the sofa with a hide-bound fly swatter.

Artemis eyed the seat. "No. I think I'll stand."

Kronski sank into an office chair. "Oh, I get it. Grown-up sofa. It's difficult to be taken seriously when your feet don't touch the ground."

The doctor rubbed his eyes with stubby thumbs, then donned his trademark glasses.

"You have no idea what it's been like for me, Ah-temis. Hounded from country to country because of my beliefs, like some common criminal. And now that I have *finally* found somewhere to call home—now that I have persuaded the committee to meet here—I lose my trial animal. That lemur was the centerpiece of the entire conference."

Kronski's voice was steady and he seemed to have recovered himself since his breakdown at the leather souk.

"The Extinctionists' committee are very powerful men, Ah-temis. They are accustomed to comfort and convenience. Morocco is hardly convenient. I had to build this compound to entice them down here, and promise a big opening to the conference. And now all I have to show is a shining hand."

Kronski brandished his hand, which was largely slime-free, but it did seem to glow faintly.

"All is not lost, Doctor," said Artemis soothingly. "I can provide you with something that will rejuvenate your society and make it globally relevant."

Kronski's frown was skeptical, but he leaned forward, arms slightly outstretched.

His face says no, thought Artemis. But his body language says yes.

"What are you selling, Ah-temis?"

Artemis opened the gallery on his phone and selected a photograph.

"This," he said, passing the phone to Kronski.

The doctor studied the photograph, and the skepticism in his eyes grew more pronounced.

"What is this? Photo manipulation?"

“No. Genuine. This creature is real.”

“Come on, Ah-temis. What we’ve got here is latex and bone implants. Nothing more.”

Artemis nodded. “That’s a fair reaction. So you don’t pay until you’re satisfied.”

“I already paid.”

“You paid for a lemur,” Artemis countered. “This is an undiscovered species. Possibly a threat to mankind. This is what the Extinctionists are all about. Imagine how many members will clamor to donate to your church when you uncover this threat.”

Kronski nodded. “You put together a good argument for a ten-year-old. How much do I pay?”

“You pay five million euros. Nonnegotiable.”

“Cash?”

“Diamonds.”

Kronski pouted. “I won’t pay a single stone until I verify the authenticity of your product.”

“That’s fair.”

“That’s mighty accommodating of you, Fowl. How do you know I won’t double-cross you? After all, I’m pretty sure that you had a hand in whatever happened back at the souk. Payback is fair play where I come from.”

“You might double-cross me, Damon. But you won’t double-cross Butler. You are not a stupid man.”

Kronski grunted, impressed. “I got to hand it to you, boy. You’ve got all the angles figured. You present ’em well too.” He stared absently at his glowing hand. “You ever think it strange, Ah-temis, how a kid like you winds up going eyeball to eyeball with an old crook like me?”

“I don’t understand the question,” said Artemis truthfully.

Kronski clapped his hands and laughed. “It delights me, Ah-temis,” he said, “that a boy such as you exists. It makes my day.” The laughter stopped suddenly, as though cut off by a guillotine. “Now, how soon can I inspect the creature?”

“Immediately,” replied Artemis.

“Good. Well, text your man to come hither. Let’s say it takes him thirty minutes to get here, another ten to clear security. We can meet him in the grand lodge in one hour.”

“I said immediately,” said Artemis, clicking his fingers. Butler stepped out from behind a curtain, a Kevlar duffel bag under one arm.

Kronski squealed briefly, then rolled his eyes in frustration. “I can’t control that. . . . Ever since the koala in Cleveland. It’s so embarrassing. . . .”

File and save, thought Artemis. Koala in Cleveland.

“Anyway,” continued the doctor, “how did he get in here?”

Butler shrugged. “I came in the same way you did, Doctor.”

“You were in the Land Rover,” breathed Kronski. “Very clever.”

“Not really. More lax on your part than clever on ours.”

“I will remember that. Do you have the merchandise with you?”

Butler’s mouth tightened, and Artemis knew that he was being pushed to the limits of his loyalty by this transaction. The lemur had been bad enough, but this female in the bag was some kind of person.

Wordlessly, the bodyguard placed the duffel on the desktop. Artemis tugged on the zipper, but Butler stopped him.

“She has some kind of hypnotizing skills. I once met a guy in Laos who could put the whammy on you, but nothing like this. She tried it outside the souk and I nearly ran into a camel, so I taped her mouth. Also, as we know, she can turn invisible. When I opened the bag first, she wasn’t there. I think her juice is running out, though. There could be more stunts; who knows what tricks she has hidden in those pointed ears. Are you prepared to take that risk?”

“Yes,” said Kronski, almost foaming at the mouth. “Absolutely yes. Open the bag.”

Butler removed his hand, and Artemis unzipped the duffel, exposing the figure inside.

Kronski stared into the mismatched eyes, ran a hand across the inhumanly wide brow, tugged one of the ears, then staggered to the office bar and poured himself a glass of water with shaky hands.

“Five million at today’s market price,” he said. “You said five and we agreed. No upping the price now.”

Artemis smiled. The doctor was hooked.

“Five million,” he said. “Plus expenses.”

Artemis the elder rode back to the landing site on a collapsible LEP scooter designed to resemble a 1950s human Lambretta. The resemblance was only bumper deep, as there were not many Lambrettas that came equipped with clean nuclear batteries, Gnommish satellite navigation, and self-destruct buttons.

The Ifrane road outside the imperial city was part of the fertile Fez river basin and was lined with olive groves and golf courses.

Ancient and modern. Coexisting.

Overhead the stars seemed closer and fiercer than at home in Ireland, shining down like stadium lights, as though Africa were somehow closer to the rest of the universe.

I lost her. I lost Holly.

But he did have a plan. A half-decent plan. All it needed was a bit of fairy technology to open a few doors, and then there was still a chance. Because without Holly, all was lost. There would be no future for any of them.

It took almost an hour to find the particular golf course where Holly had parked the LEP shuttle. Not that there was much evidence of a craft in that spot, besides a slightly flat plane of sand in the bunker. Holly had nosed the shuttle deep into the dry sand and left the shield powered on. Artemis only found it himself with the help of the bike’s navigation systems.

He collapsed the scooter into a Frisbee-size disk and climbed down through the roof hatch. Mulch Diggums was idly swiveling himself in the pilot’s chair. “That’s my scooter, Mud Boy,” he said. “That came off the trolley, so I take it with me.” Artemis shut the hatch behind him. “Where’s the lemur? Where’s Jayjay?”

Mulch answered these questions with some of his own. “Where’s Holly? Have you lost her?”

“Yes,” Artemis admitted miserably. “The boy outwitted me. He knew we would come for the lemur. He sacrificed it to get Holly.”

“Smart,” said Mulch. “Anyway, I’m off, see you . . .”

“See you? *See you?* One of your fairy comrades is in danger and you’re just going to desert her?”

Mulch raised his palms. “Hey, calm down, Mud Boy. The LEP are not my comrades. We had a

deal: I get you the little furry fellow and you get me a trolley of LEP tech goodies. Job done, both parties happy.”

At that moment Jayjay poked his head around the bathroom door.

“What’s he doing in there?”

Mulch grinned. “Take two guesses.”

“Lemurs cannot use advanced plumbing.”

“See for yourself. Whatever’s in there, I’m blaming Jayjay.”

He clicked his furry fingers, and the lemur ran along his arm, onto his head.

“See? He accepts responsibility.” Mulch frowned. “You’re not going to trade this fellow for Captain Short, are you?”

“No point,” said Artemis, accessing the LEP central database. “It would be like trying to trade a hairpin for Excalibur.”

Mulch chewed his lip. “I’m familiar with the Excalibur story, so I know what you’re trying to say there. A hairpin is useless, Excalibur is wonderful, and so on. But in some instances a hairpin is extremely useful. Now, if you had said a *rubber* hairpin . . . Do you see what I’m getting at?”

Artemis ignored him, tapping furiously at the V-board that had appeared in front of him. He needed to know everything he could about the Extinctionists, and Foaly had an extensive file on them.

Mulch tickled Jayjay under the chin. “I was getting pretty fond of Captain Short, against my better judgment. I suppose I could dig in and rescue her.”

This was a genuine offer and a fair point, so Artemis spared a moment to address it.

“Not possible. Kronski has seen the tunnel rescue before and he won’t fall for it again. At any rate, you wouldn’t survive the temperature during the day. Even underground you wouldn’t be safe. The earth is so dry that cracks can penetrate up to fifty feet in open ground. One pinprick of midday sun and you would crisp like an old book in a furnace.”

Mulch winced. “Now you see *that* image works really well. So what are you going to do?”

Artemis used the advanced fairy technology to print a leopard print card with an Extinctionists’ hologram flashing silver and purple in the center.

“I’m going to the Extinctionists’ banquet tonight,” he said, flicking the card with his forefinger. “After all, I have been invited. All I need is a disguise and some medical supplies.”

Mulch was impressed. “That’s very good. You’re almost as devious as I am.”

Artemis turned back to the V-board. It would take time to firm up his cover.

“You have no idea,” he said.

The night of the Extinctionists’ banquet was upon him, and Kronski’s nerves were frazzled. He danced around his chalet wearing nothing but a bath towel, anxiously humming his way through the tunes from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Kronski often dreamed that *he* was wearing the technicolor coat, and it was fashioned from the pelts of all the animals he had hunted to extinction. He always awoke smiling.

Everything has to be perfect. This is the biggest night of my life. Thank you, little Ah-temis.

There was a lot riding on this conference, and the banquet generally set the tone for the entire weekend. Pull off something big at the banquet and the members would be buzzing about it for days. The Internet would be alive with chatter.

And it doesn't get any bigger than a brand-new sentient species. The Extinctionists are about to go global.

And just in time. Truth be told, the Extinctionists were old news. Subscriptions were dropping off, and for the first time since its inception, the conference was not a total sellout. In the beginning it had been wonderful, so many exciting species to hunt and nail to the wall. But now countries were protecting their rare animals, especially the big ones. There was no flying to India for a tiger shoot anymore. And the sub-Saharan nations took it extremely badly if a group of well-armed Extinctionists showed up in one of their reserves and began taking potshots at elephants. It was getting to the point where government officials were refusing bribes. *Refusing bribes.*

There was another problem with the Extinctionists, though Kronski would never admit it aloud. The group had become a touchstone for the lunatic fringe. His heartfelt hatred for the animal kingdom was attracting bloodthirsty crazies who could not see past putting a bullet in a dumb beast. They could not grasp the philosophy of the organization. Man is king, and animals survive only so long as they contribute to the comfort of their masters. An animal without use is wasting precious air and should be wiped out.

But this new creature changed everything. Everyone would want to see her. They would film the entire trial and execution, leak the tape, and then the world would come to Damon Kronski.

One year of donations, thought Kronski. Then I retire to enjoy my wealth. Five million. This fairy, or whatever it is, is worth ten times that. A hundred times.

Kronski jiggled in front of the air conditioner for a minute then selected a suit from his wardrobe. Purple, he thought. Tonight I shall be emperor.

As an afterthought he plucked a matching tasseled Caspian tiger-skin hat from an upper shelf. When in Fez, he thought brightly.

The Fowl Lear Jet, 30, 000 Feet Over Gibraltar

Ten-year-old Artemis Fowl tried his best to relax in one of the Lear jet's plush leather chairs, but there was a tension knot at the base of his skull.

I need a massage, he thought. Or some herbal tea.

Artemis was perfectly aware what was causing the tension.

I have sold a creature . . . a person . . . to the Extinctionists.

Being as smart as he was, Artemis was perfectly capable of constructing an argument to justify his actions.

Her friends will free her. They almost outsmarted me, they can certainly outsmart Kronski. That fairy creature is probably on her way back to wherever she came from right now, with the lemur under her arm.

Artemis distracted himself from this shaky reasoning by concentrating on Kronski.

Something really should be done about that man.

A titanium PowerBook hummed gently on Artemis's fold-out tray. He woke the screen and opened his personal Internet browser program that he had written as a school project. Thanks to a powerful and illegal antenna in the jet's cargo bay, he was able to pick up radio, television, and Internet signals almost anywhere in the world.

Organizations like the Extinctionists live and die on their reputations, he thought. It would be an

amusing exercise to destroy Kronski's reputation using the power of the Web.

All it would take was some research and the placement of a little video on a few of the Net's more popular networking sites.

Twenty minutes later Artemis junior was putting the finishing touches to his project when Butler ducked through the cockpit door.

"Hungry?" asked the bodyguard. "There's some hummus in the fridge, and I made yogurt-and-honey smoothies."

Artemis embedded his video project onto the final Web site.

"No, thank you," mumbled Artemis. "I'm not hungry."

"That will be the guilt gnawing at your soul," said Butler candidly, helping himself from the fridge. "Like a rat on an old bone."

"Thank you for the simile, Butler, but what's done is done."

"Did we have to leave Kronski the weapon?"

"Please, I put remote-destruct charges in my hardware, do you really think such an advanced race will leave their technology unprotected? I wouldn't be surprised if that gun is melting in Kronski's hands. I had to leave it as a sweetener."

"I doubt the creature is melting."

"Stop this, Butler. I made a deal and that's the end of it."

Butler sat opposite him. "Hmm. So you are governed by some sort of code now. Honor among criminals. Interesting. So what's that you're cooking up on your computer?"

Artemis rubbed the tense spot on his neck. "Please, Butler. All of this is for my father. You know it must be done."

"One question," said Butler, ripping the plastic from a cutlery set. "Would your father want it to be done this way?"

Artemis did not answer, just sat and rubbed his neck.

Five minutes later Butler took pity on the ten-year-old. "I thought we might turn the plane around and give those strange creatures a little help. Fez Saïss airport has reopened, so we could be back there in a couple of hours."

Artemis frowned. It was the right thing to do, but it was not on his agenda. Returning to Fez would not save his father.

Butler folded his paper plate in half, trapping the debris from his meal inside.

"Artemis, I would like to swing the jet around, and I intend to do that unless you instruct me not to. All you need to do is say the word."

Artemis watched his bodyguard return to the cockpit, but said nothing.

Morocco

The Domaine des Hommes was buzzing with limo-loads of Extinctionists coming in from the airport, each one wearing their hatred for animals on their sleeve, or on their heads or feet. Kronski spotted a lady sporting thigh-high Ibex boots. Pyrenean, if he wasn't mistaken. And there was old Jeffrey Coontz-Meyers with his quagga-backed tweed jacket. And Contessa Irina Kostovich, her pale neck protected from the evening chill by a Honshu wolf stole.

Kronski smiled and greeted each one warmly and most by name. Every year there were fewer

newcomers to the ranks, but that would all change after the trial tonight. He skipped along toward the banquet hall.

The hall itself had been designed by Schiller-Haus in Munich, and was essentially a huge prefabricated kit, which arrived in containers and was erected by German specialists in less than four weeks. Incredible, really. It was an impressive structure, more formal in appearance than the chalets, which was only proper, as serious business was conducted inside. Fair trials and then executions.

Fair trials, thought Kronski, and giggled.

The main doors were guarded by two burly Moroccan gentlemen in evening wear. Kronski had considered crested jumpsuits for the guards, but dismissed the idea as too Bond.

I am not Dr. No. I am Dr. No-Animals.

Kronski breezed past the guards, down a corridor carpeted with sumptuous local rugs, and into a double-height banquet hall with a triple-glazed glass roof. The stars seemed close enough to reach out and capture.

The decor was a tasteful blend of classic and modern. Tasteful except for the gorilla-paw ashtrays on each table and the row of elephant-foot champagne coolers on stands outside the kitchen doors. Kronski squeezed through the double doors, past a brushed-steel kitchen, to the walk-in freezer at the rear.

The creature sat flanked by three more guards. She was cuffed to a plastic baby chair borrowed from the compound's creche. Her features were alert and sullen. Her weapon lay out of reach on a steel trolley.

If looks were bullets, thought Kronski, picking up the tiny weapon and weighing it on his palm, I would be riddled.

He pointed the weapon at a frozen ham hock hanging on a chain and pulled the tiny trigger. There was no kickback and no obvious flash of light, but the ham was now steaming and ready to serve.

Kronski raised the violet-colored sunglasses that he wore day and night, to make sure his vision was accurate.

"My goodness," he said in wonderment. "This is quite a toy."

He stamped on the steel floor, sending a bong reverberating through the chamber.

"No tunneling out this time," he announced. "Not like at the souk. Do you speak English, creature? Do you know what I am saying to you?"

The creature rolled her eyes.

I would answer you, her expression said, but there is tape across my mouth.

"And for good reason," said Kronski, as though the sentence had been spoken aloud. "We know all about your hypnotism tricks. And the invisibility." He pinched her cheek as one would a cute infant. "Your skin feels almost human. What are you? A fairy, is that it?"

Another eye roll.

If eye-rolling were a sport, this creature would be a gold-medal winner, thought the doctor. Well, perhaps silver medal. Gold would surely go to my ex-wife, who's no slacker in the eye-rolling department herself.

Kronski addressed the guards. "*Est-ce qu'elle a bougé?*" he asked. "Has she moved?"

The men shook their heads. It was a stupid question. How could she move?

"Very well. Good. All proceeds according to my plan."

Now Kronski rolled his own eyes. “Listen to me. *All proceeds according to my plan.* That is so Doctor No. I should go and get myself some metal hands. What do you think, gentlemen?”

“Metal hands?” said the newest guard, unaccustomed to Kronski’s rants. The other two were well aware that many of the doctor’s questions were rhetorical, especially the ones about Andrew Lloyd Webber or James Bond.

Kronski ignored the new guy. He placed a finger on pursed lips for a moment, to communicate the importance of what he was about to say, then took a deep whistling breath through his nose.

“Okay, gentlemen. Everyone listening? This evening couldn’t be more important. The future of the entire organization depends on it. Everything must be totally perfect. Do not take your eyes off the prisoner and do not remove her restraints or gag. No one is to see her until the trial begins. I paid five million in diamonds for the privilege of a grand reveal, so no one gets in here but me. Understood?”

This was not a rhetorical question, though it took the new guy a moment to realize it.

“Yes, sir. Understood,” he blurted, a fraction after the other two.

“If something does go wrong, then your final job of the evening will be burial duty.” Kronski winked at the new guard. “And you know what they say: last in first out.”

* * *

The atmosphere at the banquet was a little jaded until the food arrived. The thing about Extinctionists was that they were picky eaters. Some hated animals so much that they were vegetarians, which limited the menu somewhat. But this year Kronski had managed to poach a chef from a vegetarian restaurant in Edinburgh who could do things with a zucchini that would make the most hardened carnivore weep.

They started with a subtle tomato-and-pepper soup in baby turtle shells. Then a light parcel of roast vegetables in pastry with a dollop of Greek yogurt, served in a monkey-skull saucer. All very tasty, and by now the wine was relaxing the guests.

Kronski’s stomach was so churned with nerves that he could not eat a single bite, which was most unusual for him. He hadn’t felt this giddy since his very first banquet in Austin all those years ago.

I am on the verge of greatness. Soon my name will be mentioned in the same sentence as Bobby Jo Haggard or Jo Bobby Saggart. The great evangelist Extinctionists. Damon Kronski, the man who saved the world.

Two things would make this banquet the greatest ever held.

The entrée and the trial.

The entrée would delight everyone, meat-eaters and vegetarians alike. The vegetarians could not eat it, but at least they could marvel at the artistry it took to prepare the dish.

Kronski tapped a small gong beside his place setting and stood to introduce the dish, as was the custom.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “Let me tell you a story of extinction. In July 1889, Professor D. S. Jordan visited Twin Lakes in Colorado and published his discoveries in the 1891 Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission. He found what he proclaimed to be a new species, the yellowfin cutthroat. In his report Jordan described the fish as silvery olive with a broad lemon-yellow shade along the sides, lower fins bright golden yellow, and a deep red dash on each side of the throat, hence the “cutthroat.” Until about 1903, yellowfin cutthroats survived in Twin Lakes. The end for the yellowfin came soon after the introduction of the rainbow trout to Twin Lakes. Other trout interbred

with the rainbows, but the yellowfins quickly disappeared and are now completely extinct.”

Nobody shed a tear. In fact, there was a smattering of applause for the *E* word.

Kronski raised a hand. “No, no. This is not a cause for joy. It is said that the yellowfin was a very tasty fish, with a particularly sweet flavor. What a pity we shall never taste it.” He paused dramatically. “Or shall we . . . ?”

At the rear of the room a large false wall slid aside to reveal a red velvet curtain. With great ceremony, Kronski drew a remote control from his jacket and zapped the curtain, which pulled back with a smooth swish. Behind it was an enormous trolley bearing what appeared to be a miniature glacier. Silver and steaming.

The guests sat forward, intrigued.

“What if there had been a flash freeze more than a hundred years ago in Twin Lakes?”

A twittering began among the diners.

No.

Surely not.

Impossible.

“What if a frozen chunk of lake had been trapped by a landslide deep in an uncharted crevasse and was kept solid by near zero currents.”

Then that would mean . . .

Inside that chunk . . .

“What if that chunk surfaced a mere six weeks ago on the land of my good friend Tommy Kirkenhazard. One of our own faithful members.”

Tommy stood to take a bow, waving his Texas gray wolf Stetson. Though his teeth were smiling, his eyes were shooting daggers at Kronski. It was obvious to the entire room that there was bad blood between the two.

“Then it would be possible, outrageously expensive, and difficult, but possible to transport that chunk of ice here. A chunk that contains a sizeable shoal of yellowfin cutthroat trout.” Kronski drew breath to allow this information to sink in. “Then we, dear friends, could be the first people to eat yellowfin in a hundred years.”

This prospect even had a few of the vegetarians salivating.

“Watch, Extinctionists. Watch and be amazed.”

Kronski clicked his fingers, and a dozen kitchen staff wheeled the ponderous trolley into the center of the banqueting area, where it rested on a steel grille. The workers then stripped off their uniforms to reveal monkey costumes underneath.

Have I gone over the top with the monkey rigs? Kronski wondered. Is it just too Broadway?

But a quick survey of his guests assured him that they remained enthralled.

The kitchen staff were actually trained circus acrobats from one of the Cirque du Soleil knockoffs touring north Africa. They were only too glad to take a few days out of their schedule to put on this private show for the Extinctionists.

They swarmed up the huge ice block, anchoring themselves on with ropes, crampons, or grappling hooks, and began demolishing it with chainsaws, flaming swords, and flamethrowers, all produced seemingly from nowhere.

It was a spectacular indulgence. Ice flew, showering the guests, and the buzz of machinery was

deafening.

Quickly the shoal of yellowfin poked through the blue murk of ice. They hung, wide-eyed and frozen in midturn, their bodies caught by the flash freeze.

What a way to go, thought Kronski. With absolutely no inkling. Wonderful.

The performers began carving the fish in blocks from the ice, and each one was passed down to one of a dozen line cooks, who had appeared from the side doors wheeling gas burners. Each individual block was slid into a heated colander to steam off excess ice, then the fish were expertly filleted and fried in olive oil with a selection of chunky cut vegetables and a crushed clove of garlic.

For the vegetarians there was a champagne mushroom risotto, though Kronski did not anticipate many takers. The nonmeat eaters would accept the fish just to stab it.

The meal was a huge success, and the level of delighted chatter rose to fill the hall.

Kronski managed to eat half a fillet, in spite of his nerves.

Delicious. Exquisite.

They think that was the highlight, he thought. They ain't seen nothing yet.

After coffee, when the Extinctionists were loosening their cummerbunds or turning fat cigars for an even burn, Kronski instructed his staff to set up the courtroom.

They responded with the speed and expertise of a Formula One pit team, as well they should after three months of being whipped into shape. Literally. The team of workers swarmed across the grid where the melted ice sloshed below like a disturbed swimming pool, a few stray yellowfins floating on the surface. They covered this section of floor and exposed a second pit, this one lined with steel and covered with scorch marks.

Two podiums and a dock were wheeled into the center of the hall, taking the place of the ice trolley. The podiums had computers on their swivel tops, and the wooden dock was occupied by a cage. The cage's resident was masked by a curtain of leopard skin.

The diners' chatter ceased as everybody held their breath for the big reveal. This was the moment everyone had waited for, these millionaires and billionaires paying through the nose for a few moments of ultimate power: holding the fate of an entire species in their hands, showing the rest of the planet who was boss. The guests did not notice the dozen or so sharpshooters placed discreetly on the upper terrace in case the creature on trial displayed any new magical powers. There was little chance of a subterranean rescue, as the entire hall was built on a foundation of steel rods and concrete.

Kronski milked the moment, rising slowly from his seat and sauntering across to the prosecutor's podium.

He steepled his fingers, allowing the moment to build, then began his presentation.

"Every year we put a rare animal on trial."

There were a few hoots from the audience, which Kronski waved away good-naturedly.

"A *real* trial, where the host prosecutes, and one of you lucky people gets to defend. The idea is simplicity. If you can convince a jury of your unprejudiced peers . . ."

More hooting.

". . . that the creature in this cage contributes positively to human existence on this planet, then we will free the creature, which, believe it or not, did happen once in 1983. A little before my time, but I am assured that it actually happened. If the defense counsel's peers are not convinced of the animal's usefulness, then I press this button." And here, Kronski's bulbous fingers twiddled playfully with an oversize red button on his remote control. And the animal drops from its cage into the pit,

passing the laser eye beam, which activates the gas-powered flame jets. Voilà, instant cremation.

“Allow me to demonstrate. Indulge me; it’s a new pit. I’ve been testing it all week.”

He nodded at one of the staff, who yanked up a section of the grid with a steel hook. Kronski then picked a melon from a fruit platter and tossed it into the pit. There was a beep followed by an eruption of blue-white flame gouts from nozzles ranged around the pit walls. The melon was burned to black floating crisps.

The display drew an impressed round of applause, but not everyone appreciated Kronski’s grandstanding.

Jeffrey Coontz-Meyers cupped both hands around his mouth. “Come on, Damon. What have we got tonight?”

Not another monkey. Every year it’s monkeys.”

Generally interruptions would irritate Kronski, but not tonight. On this night all hectoring, however witty, would be swept from people’s memories the second that curtain was drawn aside.

“No, Jeffrey, not another monkey. What if—”

Jeffrey Coontz-Meyers groaned vocally. “Please, no more *what if*’s. We had half a dozen with the fish. Show us the blasted creature.”

Kronski bowed. “As you wish.”

He thumbed a button on his remote control, and a large view screen descended from the rafters, covering the back wall. Another button pushed, and the curtain concealing the caged creature swished smoothly to one side.

Holly was revealed, cuffed to the baby chair, her eyes darting and furious.

At first the main reaction was puzzlement.

Is it a little girl?

It’s just a child.

Has Kronski gone mad? I knew he sang to himself, but this?

Then the Extinctionists’ eyes were drawn to the screen, which was displaying a feed from a camera clamped to the cage.

Oh my lord. Her ears. Look at her ears.

She’s not human.

What is that? What is it?

Tommy Kirkenhazard stood. “This’d better not be a hoax, Damon. Or we’ll string you up.”

“Two points,” said Kronski softly. “First, this is no hoax. I have unearthed an undiscovered species; as a matter of fact, I believe it to be a fairy. Second, if this was a hoax, you would not be stringing anyone up, Kirkenhazard. My men would cut you down before you could wave that ridiculous hat of yours and shout ‘Yee-haw.’”

Sometimes it was good to send a shiver down people’s spines. Remind them where the power was.

“Of course, your skepticism is to be expected, welcomed, in fact. To put your minds at rest, I will need a volunteer from the audience. How about you, Tommy? How’s that backbone of yours?”

Tommy Kirkenhazard gulped down half a glass of whiskey to bolster his nerves, then made his way to the cage.

Good performance, Tommy, thought Kronski. It's almost as if we hadn't arranged this little confrontation to give me a bit more credibility.

Kirkenhazard stood as close to Holly as he dared, then reached in slowly to tweak her ear.

"My saints, it's no fake. This is the real deal." He stood back, and the truth of what was happening filled his face with joy. "We got ourselves a fairy."

Kirkenhazard rushed across to Kronski's podium and pumped his hand, clapping his back.

And so my biggest critic is converted. The rest will follow like sheep. Useful animals, sheep.

Kronski silently congratulated himself.

"I will prosecute the fairy, as is the tradition," Kronski told the crowd. "But who will defend? What unlucky member will draw the black ball. Who will it be?"

Kronski nodded at the maître d'.

"Bring the bag."

Like many ancient organizations, the Extinctionists were bound by tradition, and one of these traditions was that the creature on trial could be defended by any member of the assembly, and if no member was willing, one would be chosen by lottery. A bag of white balls, with one black. The spherical equivalent of the short straw.

"No need for the bag," said a voice. "I will defend the creature."

Heads turned to locate the speaker. It was a slender young man with a goatee and piercing blue eyes. He was wearing tinted glasses and a lightweight linen suit.

Kronski had noticed him earlier, but could not put a name to the face, which disturbed him.

"And you are?" he asked, while swiveling his laptop so that the built-in camera was aimed at this stranger.

The young man smiled. "Why don't we give your identification software a moment to whisper the answer to you."

Kronski thumbed ENTER, the computer captured an image, and five seconds later it plucked membership details from the Extinctionists' file.

Malachy Pasteur. Young French-Irish heir to an abattoir empire. Made a sizeable donation to the Extinctionists' coffers. His first conference. As with all attendees, Pasteur was thoroughly vetted before his invitation was issued. A valuable addition to the ranks.

Kronski was all charm.

"Mr. Pasteur. We are delighted to welcome you to Morocco. But tell me, why would you wish to defend this creature? Her fate is almost certainly sealed."

The young man walked briskly to the podium. "I enjoy a challenge. It is a mental exercise."

"Defending *vermin* is an exercise?"

"*Especially vermin*," retorted Pasteur, lifting the lid on his laptop. "It is easy to defend a servile, useful animal like the common cow. But this? This will be a hard-fought battle."

"A pity to be crushed in battle so young," said Kronski, his lower lip hanging with mock sympathy.

Pasteur drummed his fingers on the podium. "I have always liked your style, Dr. Kronski. Your commitment to the ideals of Extinctionism. For years I have followed your career, since I was a boy in Dublin, in fact. Lately, however, I feel that the organization has lost its way, and I am not the only one with this feeling."

Kronski ground his teeth. So that was it. A naked challenge to his leadership.

“Be careful what you say, Pasteur. You tread on dangerous ground.”

Pasteur glanced at the floor below him where ice water still sloshed in the pit beneath. “You mean I could sleep with the fishes? You would kill me, Doctor? A mere boy? I don’t think that would bolster your credibility much.”

He’s right, fumed Kronski. I can’t kill him. I must win this trial.

The doctor forced his mouth to smile. “I don’t kill *humans*,” he said. “Just animals. Like the animal in this cage.”

Kronski’s many supporters applauded, but that still left many silent.

I was wrong to come here, Kronski realized. It is too remote. Nowhere for private jets to land. Next year I will find somewhere in Europe. I will announce the move as soon as I crush this whelp.

“Allow me to explain the rules,” continued Kronski, thinking, *Explaining the rules puts me in charge and gives me the upper hand, psychologically speaking.*

“No need,” said Pasteur brusquely. “I have read several transcripts. The prosecutor puts his case, the defender puts his case. A few minutes of lively debate, then each table votes. Simple. Can we please proceed, Doctor. No one here appreciates their time being wasted.”

Clever, young man. Putting yourself on the same side as the jury. No matter. I know these people, and they will never acquit a beast, no matter how pretty she is.

“Very well. We shall proceed.” He selected a document on his desktop. His opening statement. Kronski knew it by heart, but it was comforting to have the words easily accessible.

“People say that we Extinctionists hate animals,” began Kronski. “But this is not the case. We do not hate poor dumb animals; rather, we love humans. We love humans and will do whatever it takes to ensure that we, as a race, survive for as long as possible. This planet has limited resources, and I, for one, say we should hoard them for ourselves. Why should humans starve when dumb animals grow fat? Why should humans freeze when beasts lie toasty warm in their coats of fur?”

Malachy Pasteur made a noise somewhere between a cough and a chuckle. “Really, Dr. Kronski, I have read several variations on this speech. Every year, it seems, you trot out the same simplistic arguments. Can we please focus on the creature before us tonight?”

A tittering ripple spread among the banquet guests, and Kronski had to struggle to contain his temper. It seemed he had a battle on his hands. Very well, then.

“Most amusing, boy. I was going to take it easy on you, but now the gloves are off.”

“We are delighted to hear it.”

We? We?

Pasteur was swinging the Extinctionists his way without their even knowing it.

Kronski summoned every last drop of charisma from inside himself, flashing back to his youth, to those long summer days spent watching his evangelist daddy whip up the crowds inside a canvas tent.

He raised his arms high, each finger bent back until the tendons strained.

“This is not what we are about, people,” he thundered. “We did not travel all this way for some petty verbal sparring. *This* is what the Extinctionists are about.” Kronski pointed a rigid finger at Holly. “Ridding our planet of creatures like this.”

Kronski shot a sideways glance at Pasteur, who was leaning chin on hands, a bemused look on his

face. Standard opposition behavior.

“We have a new species here, friends. A *dangerous* species. It can make itself invisible, it can hypnotize through speech. It was *armed*.”

And to much oohing from the crowd, Kronski drew forth Holly’s Neutrino handgun from his pocket.

“Do any of us wish to face a future where this could be pointed in our faces? Do we? The answer, I think, is clearly no. Now, I’m not going to pretend that this is the last one of its kind. I feel certain that there are thousands of these fairies, or aliens, or whatever, all around us. But does that mean we should grovel and release this little creature? I say no. I say we send a message. Execute one, and the rest will know we mean business. The governments of the world despise us now, but tomorrow they will come banging down our door for guidance.”

Time for the big finish. “We are Extinctionists, and our time is now!”

It was a good speech and drew wave after wave of applause, which Pasteur rode out with the same bemused expression.

Kronski accepted the applause with a boxer’s rolling of the shoulders, then nodded toward the opposite podium.

“The floor is yours, boy.”

Pasteur straightened and cleared his throat . . .

. . . Artemis straightened and cleared his throat. The fake beard glued to his chin itched like crazy, but he resisted the impulse to scratch it. In a fair arena he would destroy Kronski’s arguments in about five seconds, but this was not a fair arena, or even a sane one. These people were bloodthirsty, jaded billionaires, using their money to buy illicit excitement. Murder was just another service that could be purchased. He needed to handle this crowd carefully. Push the right buttons. First of all he had to establish himself as one of them.

“When I was young, and the family wintered in South Africa, my grandfather would tell me stories of a time when people had the right attitude toward animals. ‘We kill ’em when it suits us,’ he said to me. ‘When it serves our purposes.’ This is what the Extinctionists used to be about. A species was not *protected* unless we humans benefited from its survival. We kill when it *benefits* us. If an animal is using the planet’s resources and not directly contributing to our health, safety, and comfort, we wipe it out. Simple as that. This was an ideal worth fighting for. Worth killing for. But this . . .” Artemis pointed at the pit below him and Holly in her cage. “This is a circus. This is an insult to the memory of our ancestors who gave their time and gold to the Extinctionists’ cause.”

Artemis worked hard on his eye contact, connecting with as many people as possible in the audience, lingering for a moment with each one.

“We have an opportunity to learn from this creature. We owe it to our predecessors to find out if she can contribute to our coffers. If this is, in reality, a fairy, then who knows what magic it possesses? Magic that could be yours. If we kill this *fairy*, we will never know what unimaginable wealth dies with it.”

Artemis bowed. He had made his point. It would not be enough to sway the bloodthirsty Extinctionists, he knew, but it might be enough to make Kronski feel a little less cocky.

The doctor was waving his hands before the echo of Artemis’s voice had faded.

“How many times must we listen to this argument?” he wondered. “Master Pasteur accuses me of repeating myself, while he repeats the tired argument of every defense counsel we have ever listened

to.” Kronski tapped his lips in horror. “Ooh, let us not kill the creature, for it is potentially the source of all our power and wealth. I remember spending a fortune on a sea slug that was supposed to cure arthritis. All we got was very expensive goo. This is all supposition.”

“But this creature is magical,” objected Artemis, banging the podium with his fist. “We have all heard how she can turn invisible. Even now her mouth is taped so she cannot hypnotize us. Imagine the power we could wield if we were to unlock the secrets of these gifts. If nothing else, they would better prepare us to deal with the rest of her kind.”

Kronski’s main problem was that he agreed with much of his opposition’s argument. It made perfect sense to save the creature and tease her secrets from her, but he could not afford to lose this argument. If he did, he might as well hand over the leadership.

“We have tried to interrogate her. Our best men tried, and she told us nothing.”

“It is difficult to talk with a taped mouth,” Artemis noted drily.

Kronski drew himself to his full height, lowering the timbre of his voice for effect. “The human race faces its most deadly enemy, and you want to cozy up to it. That is not how we Extinctionists do things. If there is a threat, we wipe it out. That is how it has always been.”

This brought a roar of approval from the crowd; bloodlust trumps logic every time. Several members were on their feet, hollering. They’d had enough of the argument and wanted some action.

Kronski’s face was flushed with victory.

He thinks it’s over, thought Artemis. Poor man. And then: *This beard really itches.*

He waited calmly until the furor had trailed away, then came out from behind the podium. “I was hoping to spare you this, Doctor,” he said. “Because I respect you so much.”

Kronski flapped his lips. “Spare me what, Master Pasteur?”

“You know what. I think you have pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes long enough.”

Kronski was not in the least worried. The boy was beaten and everything else was just irritating chatter. Still, why not let Pasteur dig a hole for himself?

“And what wool would that be?”

“Are you certain you want me to continue?”

Kronski’s teeth glittered when he smiled. “Oh, absolutely certain.”

“As you wish,” said Artemis, approaching the dock. “This creature was not our original defendant. Up until yesterday we had a lemur. Not quite a monkey, Mr. Coontz-Meyers, but close enough. I say we had a lemur, but in truth we *almost* had a lemur. It went missing at the pickup. Then, and this is important, then we were sold this creature by the *same* boy who sold us the lemur, undoubtedly paid for from Extinctionists’ funds. Does anyone else think this is a little off? I do. This boy keeps his lemur and sells us a supposed fairy.”

Kronski was not so cocky now. This Pasteur fellow had a lot of information.

“*Supposed* fairy?”

“That’s right. Supposed. We have only your word for it, and of course that of Mr. Kirkenhazard, who apparently is your worst enemy. Nobody is falling for that ruse, I assure you.”

“Examine the thing yourself,” blurted Kronski, glossing over the Kirkenhazard accusation. “This is an easy argument to win.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Artemis. “I believe I shall.”

Artemis approached the cage. This was the tricky part, as it required sleight of hand and

coordination, which were the elements in every plan that he usually left to Butler.

His pocket bulged slightly with a couple of adhesive nu-skin bandages taken from Mulch's medikit. He had told the security guard that they were nicotine patches and so had been allowed to bring them through to the banquet. The bandage adhesive was activated by skin contact, and it molded itself to the contours it was applied to, assuming the color and texture of the surrounding skin.

Artemis's fingers hovered over his pocket, but it was not yet time to touch a bandage. It would simply stick to his own hand. Instead he reached into his other pocket for the phone he had stolen from the Bentley, back at Rathdown Park.

"This phone is invaluable to me," he told the Extinctionists. "It's a little bulkier than other phones, but that is because I have been installing add-ons for years. This phone is an amazing thing, really. I can stream television, watch movies, check my stocks, all the standard stuff. But I also have an X-ray camera and display. Just give me a second." Artemis pressed a few buttons, linking the phone by Bluetooth to the laptops, and from there to the large view screen.

"Ah, here we are," Artemis said, passing the phone in front of his hand. On screen an arrangement of phalanges, metacarpals, and carpals stood out darkly inside a pale foam of flesh. "You see the bones of my hand quite clearly. This is a very good projection system you have, Dr. Kronski. I congratulate you."

Kronski's smile was as fake as the congratulations had been.

"Do you have a point, Pasteur, or are you just showing us how clever you are?"

"Oh, I have a point, Doctor. And that point is, that were it not for the width of the brow and the pointed ears, this creature seems remarkably like a little girl."

Kronski snorted. "A pity about the ears and brow. But for them you would have an argument."

"Precisely," said Artemis, and passed the phone before Holly's face. On screen, he played a short movie file he had constructed back in the shuttle. It showed Holly's skull with dark, dense shapes on her temples and ears.

"Implants," crowed Artemis. "Clearly the result of surgery. This *fairy* is a clever fake. You have tried to dupe us, Kronski."

Kronski's denials were lost in the roar of the crowd. The Extinctionists surged to their feet, decrying this despicable con job.

"You lied to me, Damon!" shouted Tommy Kirkenhazard, with something like anguish. "To *me*."

"Put *him* in the pit," called Contessa Irina Kostovich, her face as feral as that of the Honshu wolf on her shoulder. "Make *Kronski* extinct. He deserves it for dragging us here."

Kronski upped the volume on his podium mike. "This is ridiculous. If you have been tricked, then so have I. No! I will not believe it. This boy, this Pasteur, is lying. My fairy is real. Just give me a chance to prove it."

"I have not finished, Doctor," cried Artemis, stepping boldly to the dock. In both hands he held a Nu-skin patch, slipped into his palms during the confusion. He could feel pinpricks of heat on his flesh as the adhesive was activated. He had to act quickly or his plans would be reduced to two flesh-colored pads on his own hands.

"These ears do not seem right to me. And your friend Mr. Kirkenhazard was most gentle with them."

Artemis scrunched one Nu-skin patch into a rough cone, sealing the adhesive on itself. He thrust the other hand through the bars and made a great show of tugging on the tip, while in reality spreading

the second bandage over Holly's ear, covering the entire tip and most of the auricle.

"It's coming away," he grunted, making sure to mask the cage's camera with his forearm. "I have it."

Seconds later the bandage was dry, and one of Holly's ears was totally obscured. Artemis looked her in the eye and winked.

Play along, the wink said. I will get you out of this.

At least Artemis hoped this was what his wink communicated and not something like *Any chance of another kiss later?*

Back to business.

"It's a fake," called Artemis, holding high the crumpled flesh-colored bandage. "It came off in my hand."

Holly obligingly presented her profile to the Webcam. No more pointed ear.

Outrage was the dominant reaction from the Extinctionists.

Kronski had tricked them all, or worse, he had been bamboozled by a boy.

Artemis held the supposed fake ear aloft, squeezing it as though he were strangling a poisonous snake.

"Is this the man we want to lead us? Has Dr. Kronski displayed sound judgment in this case?"

Artemis threw the "ear" into the watery pit. "And *supposedly* this creature can hypnotize us all. I rather think her mouth is covered so she cannot speak."

With one sharp movement he ripped the tape from Holly's mouth. She winced and shot Artemis a dour glare, but then quickly dissolved into tears, playing the part of human victim to perfection.

"I didn't want to do it," she sobbed.

"Do what?" Artemis prompted.

"Dr. Kronski took me from the orphanage."

Artemis raised an eyebrow. *The orphanage?* Holly was ad-libbing.

"He told me if I had the implants, then I could live in America. After the operation I changed my mind, but the doctor wouldn't let me go."

"An orphanage," said Artemis. "Why, that's bordering on the unbelievable."

Holly's chin dropped. "He said he'd kill me if I told."

Artemis was outraged. "He said he'd kill you. And this is the man steering our organization. A man who hunts humans as well as animals." He pointed an accusing finger at a bewildered Kronski. "You, sir, are worse than the creatures we all despise, and I demand you release this poor girl."

Kronski was finished, and he knew it. But something could still be salvaged from this mess. He still had the group's account numbers, and he was the only one with the combination to the compound safe. He could be out of this place in two hours with enough riches to last a few years. All he had to do was somehow stop this Pasteur boy hamming it up.

And then he remembered. *Ham!*

"And what about this?" he shouted, brandishing Holly's gun. "I suppose this is fake too."

The Extinctionists drew back, cowering behind their seats.

"Absolutely," sneered Artemis. "A child's toy. Nothing more."

"Would you stake your life on it?"

Artemis appeared to hesitate. “N ...no need for dramatics, Doctor. Your cause is lost. Accept it.”

“No,” snapped Kronski. “If the gun is real, then the creature is real. And if she is not real, as you insist, then you have nothing to fear.”

Artemis summoned his courage. “Very well, do your worst.” He stood squarely before the tiny needle barrel, offering his chest.

“You are about to die, Pasteur,” said Kronski, without much sympathy.

“Perhaps I would be, if you could squeeze your chubby finger into the trigger guard,” said Artemis, almost as if he were goading the doctor into action.

“To hell with you then!” barked Kronski, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing much happened. A spark and a slight hum from the inner workings.

“It’s broken,” gasped the doctor.

“You don’t say,” said Artemis, who had remote-destructed the Neutrino’s charge pack from the shuttle.

Kronski raised his palms. “Okay, boy. Okay. Give me a moment to think.”

“Just let the girl go, Doctor. Save a shred of dignity. We don’t execute humans.”

“I am in charge here. I just need a second to gather myself. This wasn’t supposed to happen. This is not how she said it would go. . . .”

The doctor rested his elbows on the lectern, rubbing his eyes beneath the round, tinted spectacles.

How *she* said it would go? thought Artemis. Were there unseen forces at work here?

While Artemis was puzzling and Kronski’s world collapsed around his ample shoulders, cell phones began to ring in the banquet hall. A lot of people were receiving messages all of a sudden. In moments the room rang with a discordant symphony of beeps, *brrr*’s, and polyphonic tunes.

Kronski ignored this strange development, but Artemis was anxious. He had things under control now and did not need anything to redress the scales, or for that matter, tip Kronski over the edge.

The reactions to the incoming messages were a mixture of shock and glee.

Oh my God. Is this true? Is it real?

Play it again. Turn up the volume.

I don’t believe this. Kronski, you fool.

That’s the last straw. We are a joke. The Extinctionists are finished.

Artemis realized that all these messages were in fact the same message. Someone had an Extinctionists database and was sending them all a video.

Artemis’s own phone trilled gently. Of course it would; he had put his fake identity on every Extinctionist database he could find. And as his phone was still linked to the giant screen, the video mail began to play automatically.

Artemis recognized the scene immediately. The leather souk. And the main player was Kronski, standing on one leg, squealing with a high-pitched ruptured-balloon intensity. Comical was not the word for it. Ridiculous, farcical, and pathetic were words that came close. One thing was certain, having seen this video, no one in their right mind could respect this man ever again, much less follow his lead.

While the video played, a short message scrolled below the picture.

Here we see Dr. Damon Kronski, president of the Extinctionists, displaying surprising balance for a man his size. This reporter has learned that Kronski turned against animals when he was mauled by an escaped koala at one of his politician father's rallies in Cleveland. Witnesses to the mauling say that young Damon "squealed so sharp he coulda cut glass." A talent the good doctor does not seem to have lost. Squeal, baby, squeal!

Artemis sighed. I did this, he realized. It's just the kind of thing I would do. At another time he would have appreciated this touch, but not now. Not when he was so close to freeing Holly. Speaking of Holly . . . "Artemis, get me out of here," she hissed. "Yes, of course. Time to go." Artemis rifled through his pockets for a handy wipe.

Inside the wipe were three long coarse hairs donated by Mulch Diggums. Dwarf hairs are actually antennae that dwarfs use to navigate in dark tunnels, and have been adapted by the resourceful race to serve as skeleton keys. No doubt Holly's omnitool would have been handier, but Artemis could not risk losing that to security. The wipe had kept the hairs moist and pliable until they were needed.

Artemis removed the first hair, blew a speck of moisture from its tip, and inserted it into the cage lock, working it through the cogs. As soon as he felt the hair harden in his fingers, he turned the makeshift key and the door sprang open.

"Thank you, Mulch," he whispered, then went to work on Holly's centrally locked cuffs. The third hair would not even be needed. In seconds, Holly was free and rubbing her wrists.

"Orphanage?" said Artemis. "You don't think that was overdoing it?"

"Boo-hoo," said Holly briskly. "Let's just get back to the shuttle."

It was not to be that straightforward.

Kronski was being herded into a corner by a group of Extinctionists. They harangued and even slapped and poked the doctor, ignoring his arguments, while overhead the video message played again and again.

Oops, thought Artemis, closing his phone.

Inevitably perhaps, Kronski cracked. He batted his tormentors aside like bowling pins, clearing a circle of breathing space for himself, then, panting, he pulled a walkie-talkie from a clip on his belt. "Secure the area," he wheezed into the device. "Use all necessary force."

Even though the *Domaine des Hommes* security were technically working for the Extinctionists, their loyalties lay with the man who paid their salaries. That man was Damon Kronski. He might dress like a demented peacock and have the manners of a desert dog, but he knew the combination to the safe and paid the wages on time.

The sharpshooters on the upper terrace sent a few warning shots over the heads of the crowd, which caused utter pandemonium.

"Lock the building down," said Kronski into the walkietalkie. "I need time to gather my funds. Ten thousand dollars in cash for every man who stands by me."

There was no need for further incentive. Ten thousand dollars was two years' wages to these men.

Doors and shutters were slammed down and manned by burly guards, each one brandishing a rifle or a custom-made Moroccan nimcha sword with rhino grips, which Kronski had made for the security team.

The spooked Extinctionists bolted toward bathrooms or alcoves, anywhere that might have a window. They frantically punched numbers into their phones, screaming for help from anyone,

anywhere.

A few were more resourceful. Tommy Kirkenhazard pulled out a ceramic handgun he had smuggled in under his hat and took a few potshots at the upper terrace from behind a heavy teak bar. He was answered by a volley from above with shattered bottles, mirrors, and glasses sending slivers flying like arrowheads.

With a straight-fingered jab to the solar plexus, a tall Asian man quickly disarmed a door guard. “This way!” he called, flinging the fire door wide. The portal was quickly jammed with Extinctionist torsos.

Artemis and Holly sheltered behind the cage, watching for a way out.

“Can you shield?”

Holly twisted her chin, and one arm rippled out of sight. “I’m low on juice. I have just about enough for a minute or two. I’ve been saving it.”

Artemis scowled. “You are always low on juice. Didn’t N^o1 fill you up with his signature magic?”

“Maybe if your bodyguard hadn’t plugged me with a dart—twice. Maybe if I hadn’t had to heal you at Rathdown Park. And maybe if I hadn’t been shielding in the souk, trying to find your monkey.”

“Lemur,” said Artemis. “At least we saved Jayjay.”

Holly ducked as a hail of glass shot over her head. “My goodness, Artemis. You sound like you actually care about an animal. Nice beard, by the way.”

“Thank you. Now, do you think you could shield for long enough to disarm those two guards on the kitchen door behind us?”

Holly sized the two men up. Both had shotguns and were radiating enough malevolence to ripple the air. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good. Do it quietly. We don’t want another bottleneck. If we do get separated, let’s meet somewhere close. At the souk.”

“Okay,” said Holly, vibrating into invisibility.

A second later Artemis felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a disembodied voice in his ear.

“You came for me,” whispered Holly. “Thank you.”

Then the hand was gone.

All magic has a price. When fairies shield, they sacrifice fine motor skills and clear thought. It is infinitely more difficult to do a jigsaw when your body is vibrating faster than a hummingbird’s wings, even if your brain could stop rattling for long enough to focus on the puzzle.

In the LEP Academy, Holly had picked up a tip from an Atlantean gym coach. It really helped to beat the shield-shakes if you sucked your lower abdominals in and up, strengthening your core. It gave you something to focus on and held your torso a little tighter.

Holly practiced the exercise as she crossed the banquet floor toward the kitchen. As a frantic butter-knife-wielding Extinctionist missed her by a shade, she thought that sometimes being invisible was more dangerous than being in plain sight.

The two guards at the door were actually growling at anyone who ventured too close. They were big, even for humans, and Holly was glad that no fine motor skill would be called for. Two quick jabs into the nerve cluster above the knee should be plenty to bring these guys down.

Simple, thought Holly, then: *I shouldn't have thought that. Whenever you think that, something goes wrong.*

Of course she was dead right.

Someone started firing on Kronski's guards. Silver darts streaked through the air, then punctured skin with a sickening thunk.

Holly knew instinctively who the shooter was, and her suspicions were confirmed when she spotted a familiar silhouette anchored in the roof beams.

Butler!

The bodyguard was draped in a desert blanket, but Holly identified him from the shape of his head and also from his unmistakable shooting position: left elbow cocked out a little more than most marksmen preferred.

Young Artemis sent him back to clear a path for us, she realized. Or maybe Butler made the decision himself.

Whichever it was, Butler was not helping as much as he'd hoped. With the guards dropping, the Extinctionists were piling over their fallen captors, desperate to be free of this building.

Caged Extinctionists, thought Holly. I'm sure Artemis appreciates that irony.

Just as Holly drew back her fists, the two guards at the kitchen door clutched their necks and pitched forward, unconscious before they hit the floor.

Nice shooting. Two shots in under a second from eighty yards out. With darts too, which are about as accurate as wet sponges.

She was not the only one to notice the unguarded door. A dozen hysterical Extinctionists rushed the portal, screaming like rock-band fans.

We need to exit this building. Now.

Holly turned toward Artemis, but he was lost in a clump of advancing Extinctionists.

He must be somewhere in there, she thought; then she was pinned by the mob, borne aloft and into the kitchen.

"Artemis," she called, completely forgetting that she was still invisible. "Artemis!"

But he was nowhere to be seen. The world was a melee of elbows and torsos, sweat and screams. Voices were in her ears and ragged breath on her face, and by the time she had disentangled herself from the pack, the banquet hall was virtually deserted. A few stragglers, but no Artemis.

The souk, she thought. I will find him in the souk.

Artemis tensed himself to run. As soon as Holly took the guards out of commission, he would sprint as fast as he could and pray that he didn't trip and fall.

Imagine, to endure all of this, only to be defeated by a lack of coordination. Butler would be sure to say *I told you so* when they met in the afterlife.

Suddenly the pandemonium level jumped a few notches, and the screaming of the Extinctionists reminded Artemis of Rathdown Park's panicked animals.

Caged Extinctionists, he thought. Oh, the irony.

The kitchen door guards fell, clutching their throats.

Nice work, Captain.

Artemis bent low, like a sprinter waiting for the gun, then catapulted himself from his hiding

place behind the dock.

Kronski hit him broadside with his full weight, tumbling them both through the railings into the dock. Artemis landed heavily on the baby chair, and it collapsed underneath him, one of its arms raking along his side.

“This is all your fault,” squealed Kronski. “This was supposed to be the best night of my life.”

Artemis felt himself being smothered. His mouth and nose were jammed by sweat-soaked purple material.

He intends to kill me, thought Artemis. I have pushed him too far.

There was no time for planning, and even if there were, this was not one of those situations where a handy mathematical theorem could be found to get Artemis out of his predicament. There was only one thing to do: lash out.

So Artemis kicked, punched, and gouged. He buried his knee in Kronski’s ample stomach and blinded him with his fists.

All very superficial blows that had little lasting effect—except one. Artemis’s right heel brushed against Kronski’s chest. Kronski didn’t even feel it. But the heel connected briefly with the oversize button on the remote control in the doctor’s pocket, releasing the dock trapdoor.

The second his brain registered the loss of back support, Artemis knew what had happened.

I am dead, he realized. Sorry, Mother.

Artemis fell bodily into the pit, breaking the laser beam with his elbow. There was a beep, and half a second later the pit was filled with blue-white flame, which blasted black scorch marks in the walls.

Nothing could have survived.

Kronski braced himself against the dock rails, perspiration dripping from the tip of his nose into the pit, evaporating on the way down.

Do I feel bad about what just happened? he asked himself, aware that psychologists recommended facing trauma head-on in order to avoid stress later in life.

No, he found. I don’t. In fact, I feel as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

Kronski raised himself up with a great creaking and cracking of knees.

Now, where’s the other one? he wondered. I still have some weight to lose.

Artemis saw the flames blossom around him. He saw his skin glow blue with their light and heard their raw roar, then he was through, unscathed.

Impossible.

Obviously not. *Obviously* these flames had more bark about them than bite.

Holograms?

The pit floor yielded beneath his weight with a hiss of pneumatics, and Artemis found himself in a sub-chamber, looking up at heavy steel doors swinging closed above him.

The view from inside a swing-top bin.

A very high-tech swing-top bin, with expanding gel hinges. Fairy design, without a doubt.

Artemis remembered something Kronski had said earlier.

This is not how she said it would go. . . .

She ... She ...

Fairy design. Endangered species. What fairy had been harvesting lemur brain fluid even before the Spelltropy epidemic?

Artemis paled. Not her. Please, not her.

What do I have to do? he thought. How many times must I save the world from this lunatic?

He scrambled to his knees and saw he had been funneled onto a padded pallet. Before he could roll off, octobonds sprang from recessed apertures along the pallet's steel rim, trussing him tighter than a tumbled rodeo cow. Purple gas hissed from a dozen overhead nozzles, shrouding the pallet.

Hold your breath, Artemis told himself. Animals don't know to hold their breath.

He held on until it felt as though his sternum would split, and then just as he was about to exhale and suck in a huge breath, a second gas was pumped into the chamber, crystallizing the first. It fell onto Artemis's face like purple snowflakes.

You are asleep now. Play possum.

A small door sank smoothly into the floor, with a sound like air being blown through a straw.

Artemis peeked through one half-closed eye.

Magnetic field, he thought dully, a band of steel creasing his forehead.

I know what I will see, but I have no wish to see it.

A pixie stood framed by the doorway, her tiny, beautiful features twisted with their customary pouting cruelty.

"This," squealed Opal Kobi, pointing a vibrating finger, "is not a lemur."

THE HAIRY ONE IS DEAD

The Leather Souk

Butler jogged from the Extinctionists' compound to the leather souk. Artemis was waiting in the building where they had planned the previous day's exchange. Police presence in Fez amounted to no more than a couple of two-man patrols, and so it was easy for someone of Butler's experience to sneak around without being detected. Though it was hardly illegal to visit a medina, it was certainly frowned on to stroll around a tourist area with a large rifle strapped to one's back.

Butler ducked into a dark corner and quickly broke down his dart rifle into almost a dozen parts, slotting them into various garbage bins. It was possible that he could slip the Fez Saïss Airport customs men some *baksheesh* and simply stow the weapon under his seat, but these days it was better to be safe than sorry.

Ten-year-old Artemis was sitting at a prearranged spot in one of the sniper windows, picking nonexistent lint from his jacket sleeve, which was his version of nervous pacing.

"Well?" he asked, steeling himself for the answer.

"The female got out," said Butler. He thought it better not to mention that the long-haired male had everything under control until Artemis's video arrived.

Artemis caught the implication. "The female? The other one was there too?"

Butler nodded. "The hairy one is dead. He attempted a rescue, and it didn't work out."

Artemis gasped.

"Dead?" he said. "Dead?"

"Repeating the word won't change its meaning," said Butler sharply. "He tried to rescue his friend, and Kronski killed him for it. But what's done is done, eh? And at least we have our diamonds."

Butler checked his temper. "We should move out for the airport. I need to run the preflight checks."

Artemis was left stunned and silent, unable to take his eyes from the bag of diamonds, which winked accusingly from their slouched perch on his lap.

Holly was not having any luck. Her shield was so weak that she switched it off to save her last spark for a small healing if it was needed; and no sooner had her image solidified than one of Kronski's goons spotted her and walkie-talkied his entire squad. Now she was running for her life

through the medina, praying that Artemis was at the meeting point and that he had thought to bring the scooter.

No one was taking potshots at her, which was encouraging, unless Kronski wanted to do the potshotting himself.

No time to think about that now. Survival was the priority.

The medina was quiet this late in the evening, with only a few straggling tourists and die-hard merchants still walking the streets. Holly dodged between them, pulling down whatever she could reach to get in the way of the stampede of security men behind her. She tugged over towers of baskets, upended a kebab stand, and shouldered a table of spices, dashing a white wall with multicolored arcs.

The thunder of footsteps behind her did not recede in the least. Her tactics were not working. The security guards were simply too large and were bustling past the obstacles.

Dodge and weave, then. Lose them in the alleyways.

This tactic was no more successful than the last. Her pursuers were familiar with the medina's layout and coordinated their pursuit on handheld radios, herding Holly toward the leather souk.

Where I'll be in the open. An easy target.

Holly raced on, Artemis's loafers cutting into her heels. A series of cries and curses arose behind her as she barged without apology through bands of tourists and shoulder-slammed tea boys, sending trays flying.

I am corralled, she thought desperately. You'd better be waiting, Artemis.

It occurred to Holly that she was leading the posse directly to Artemis, but there was no other option. If he was waiting, then he could help; if not, she was on her own anyway.

She jinked left, but four huffing guards blocked the alleyway, all hefting vicious long-bladed knives.

The other way, I think.

Right, then. Holly skidded into the leather souk, heels throwing up dust fans.

Where are you, Artemis?

She cast her gaze upward toward their observation point, but there was nothing there. Not even the telltale shimmer of a hide.

He's not here.

She felt panic scratch at her heart. Holly Short was an excellent field officer, but she was way out of her jurisdiction, her league, and her time.

The leather souk was quiet now, with only a few workers scraping skins on the surrounding rooftops. Lanterns crackled below the roofline, and the giant urns lurked like alien pods. The smell was just as bad as it had been the previous day, possibly worse, as the vats had had longer to cook. The stench of droppings hit Holly like a soft, feverish glove, further addling her mind.

Keep running. Find a nook.

Holly spent half a moment considering which body part she would trade for a weapon, then sprinted for a doorway in the adjacent wall.

A guard appeared, dragging his knife from its sheath. The blade was red. Maybe blood, maybe rust. Holly switched direction, losing a shoe in the turn. There was a window one floor up, but the wall was cracked: she could make the climb.

Two more guards. Grinning. One held a net, like a gladiator.

Holly skidded to a halt.

We're in the desert! Why does he have a fishing net?

She tried again. An alleyway barely broad enough for an adult human. She was almost there when a fat guard with a ponytail to his waist and a mouthful of yellowed teeth wedged himself into the avenue, blocking it.

Trapped. Trapped. No escape and not enough magic to shield. Not even enough to mesmerize.

It was difficult to stay calm, in spite of all her training and experience. Holly could feel her animal instincts bubbling in the pit of her stomach.

Survive. Do what you have to do.

But what could she do? One unarmed child-size fairy against a squadron of armed muscle.

They formed a ragged circle around her, weaving between the urns in a slow-motion slalom. Each set of greedy glittering eyes focused on her face. Closer and closer they came, spreading their arms wide in case their prey made a dart for freedom.

Holly could see their scars and pockmarks, see the desert in their nails and on their cuffs. Smell their breath and count their fillings.

She cast her eyes toward the heavens.

“Help,” she cried.

And it began to rain diamonds.

Below the Extinctionists' Compound

“That is not a lemur,” repeated Opal Koboï, drumming a tiny toe on the floor. “I know it is not a lemur because it has no tail and it seems to be wearing clothes. This is a human, Mervall. A Mud Boy.”

A second pixie appeared in the doorway. Mervall Brill. One of the infamous Brill brothers who would break Opal out of her padded psych cell some years later. His expression was a mixture of puzzlement and terror. Not pretty on any face.

“I don't understand it, Miss Koboï,” he said, twiddling the top button on his crimson lab coat. “It was all set up for the lemur. You *mesmerized* Kronski yourself.”

Opal's nostrils flared. “Are you suggesting this is somehow my fault?” She clutched her throat as if the very idea caused her breath to fail.

“No, no, no,” said Mervall hurriedly. “It could not be Miss Koboï's fault. Miss Koboï is, after all, perfection itself. Perfection does not make mistakes.”

This outrageous statement would be recognized as blatant toadying by right-minded people, but Opal Koboï found it fair and rational.

“Exactly. Well said, Mervall. A pity your brother does not have a tenth of your wisdom.”

Mervall smiled and shuddered. The smile was in acceptance of the compliment; the wince was because the mention of his twin had reminded him that his brother was at this moment locked in a cage with a red river hog, as punishment for not complimenting Opal's new boots.

Miss Koboï was having a bad day. Currently, two out of seven were bad. If things got any worse, even though the wages were astronomical, the Brill brothers would be forced to seek alternative employment.

Mervall decided to distract his boss. “They're going crazy up there. Firing weapons. Dueling with

cutlery. Those Extinctionists are an unstable lot.”

Opal leaned over Artemis and sniffed gently, wiggling her fingers to see if the human was awake.

“The lemur was the last one. I was *this* close to being all-powerful.”

“How close?” asked Mervall.

Opal squinted at him. “Are you being funny?”

“No. I sincerely wondered. . . .”

“It’s an expression,” snapped the pixie, striding back toward the main chamber.

Mervall nodded slowly. “An expression. I see. What should I do with the human?”

Opal did not break her stride. “Oh, you might as well harvest him. Human brain fluid is a good moisturizer. Then we pack up and find that lemur ourselves.”

“Should I dump his drained corpse in the animal pit?”

Opal threw up her arms. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. Must I tell you how to do everything? Can’t you show a little initiative?”

Mervall wheeled the pallet after his boss.

The animal pit it is, then, he thought.

The Leather Souk

Diamonds rained down in glittering showers. Falling stars twinkling in the lamplight.

Young Artemis’s fee, Holly realized. He is throwing me a lifeline.

For a moment the guards were transfixed. Their faces wore the dazed expression of children who have woken and are surprised to find themselves in a good mood. They stretched out their fingers, watching the diamonds bounce and tumble.

Then one broke the spell. “*Des diamants!*” he cried.

Hearing the word spoken aloud galvanized his companions. They dropped to their knees, patting the dusky ground for the precious stones. More dived into the pungent vats as they registered tiny plops made by stones impacting on liquid.

Mayhem, thought Holly. Perfect.

She glanced upward just in time to see a small hand withdraw into the black rectangle of a window.

What made him do it? she wondered. That was a most un-Artemislike gesture.

A guard diving past her leg reminded her that things were still pretty dire.

In their greed, they have forgotten me, but perhaps they will remember their duty when the stones are pocketed.

Holly spared a moment to salute up at young Artemis’s window, then raced out of his view toward the nearest alley, only to be flattened by a puffing Damon Kronski.

“Two for two,” he huffed. “I got both of you. This must be my lucky day.”

When will this end? thought Holly incredulously. How can these things continue to happen?

Kronski pressed down on her like an enraged elephant, frown lines framing his tinted glasses, sweat flowing in sheets down his face, dripping from his pouting lip.

“Except, this is *not* my lucky day, is it,” he shouted, a keen note of hysteria on the edge of his

tone. “You saw to that. You and your accomplice. Well, my gas chamber took care of him. Now I will take care of you!”

Holly was stunned.

Artemis dead?

She would not believe it. Never. How many people had written Artemis Fowl off and lived to regret it? Plenty. She was one of them.

Holly, on the other hand, was proving easier to kill. Her vision was blurring, her limbs were treading water, and the weight of the world was on her chest. The only sense firing on all cylinders was her sense of smell.

What a way to go. Inhaling motes of pigeon droppings with your last breath.

She heard her ribs groan.

I wish Kronski could smell this.

An idea sparked in her brain, the last ember in a dying grate.

Why shouldn't he smell it? It's the least I can do.

Holly reached deep into her core of magic, searching for that last spell. There was a flicker deep inside. Not enough to shield, or even *mesmerize*, but perhaps a minor healing.

Usually healing spells were used on recent wounds, but Kronski's anosmia was a lifelong ailment. Fixing it now could be dangerous and would almost certainly be painful.

Oh well, thought Holly. If it hurts him, it hurts him.

She reached up a hand past the forearm on her throat, inching it along Kronski's face, willing the magic into her fingertips.

Kronski did not feel threatened. “What's this? Are you playing ‘got your nose’?”

Holly did not answer. Instead she closed her eyes, jammed two fingers up Kronski's nostrils, and sent her last sparks of magic down those channels.

“Heal,” she said. A wish and a prayer.

Kronski was surprised but not initially upset.

“Hey, what the . . .” he said, then sneezed. The sneeze was powerful enough to pop his ears and roll him off his captive. “What are you, five years old? Sticking fingers up my nose.” Another sneeze. Bigger this time. Blowing a trumpet of steam from each nostril.

“This is pathetic. You people are really—”

A third sneeze, this one traumatizing the entire body. Tears streamed down Kronski's face. His legs jittered and his glasses shattered in their frames.

“Oh my,” said Kronski, when he had his limbs under control. “Something's different. Something has changed.”

Then the smell hit him.

“Aarrgh,” said Kronski, then began to squeal. His tendons tightened, his toes pointed, and his fingers ripped holes in the air.

“Wow,” said Holly, massaging her throat. This was a stronger reaction than expected.

The smell was bad, but Kronski acted like he was dying. But what Holly did not fully grasp was the power of the doctor's awakened sense of smell. Imagine the joy of seeing for the first time, or the euphoria of a first step. Then square that feeling and make it negative. Take a ball of poison, dip it in

thorns and manure, wrap it in a poultice of festering bandages, boil the whole lot in a cauldron of unspeakably vile excretions, and shove it up your nose.

This is what Kronski could smell, and it was driving him out of his mind.

He lay flat on his back, flinching and pawing the sky.

“Foul,” he said, repeating the word over and over. “Foul, foul. Fowl, Fowl.”

Holly crawled to her knees, coughing and spitting onto the dry sand. Her entire being felt battered and bruised from back to spirit. She looked at Kronski’s expression and realized that there was no point in asking him questions. The president of the Extinctionists was beyond logical conversation for the time being.

Possibly for good, she thought. I don’t see him leading any international organizations for a while.

Holly noticed something. One of Kronski’s lenses had completely shattered, revealing the eyeball underneath. The iris was a strange violet, almost the same shade as the spectacles had been, but this was not what caught Holly’s attention. The edge of the retina was ragged, as though it had been nibbled on by tiny sclera fish.

This man has been *mesmerized*, Holly realized. A fairy is controlling him.

She climbed to her feet and hobbled one-shoed down the nearest alley, the voices of squabbling greed fading behind her.

If a fairy is involved, then nothing is as it seems. And if nothing is as it seems, then perhaps Artemis Fowl still lives.

Below the Extinctionists’ Compound

Mervall Brill winked at himself in the chrome door of a body freezer.

I am a handsome chap, he thought. And this lab coat covers the paunch rather well.

“Brill!” called Opal from her office. “How is that brain fluid coming?”

Merv jumped. “Just sucking him dry now, mistress.”

The pixie put his weight behind the trolley with its human cargo, trundling it down a short corridor to the lab itself. Being stuck in this tiny facility with Opal Koboï was no picnic. Just the three of them for weeks on end, draining the fluids from endangered species. Opal could afford to hire a thousand lab assistants to work for her, but she was uberparanoid about secrecy. Opal’s level of paranoia was such that she had begun to suspect plants and inanimate objects of spying on her.

“I can grow cameras!” she had shrieked at the Brill brothers during one briefing. “Who’s to say that despicable centaur Foaly hasn’t succeeded in splicing surveillance equipment to plants? So get rid of all the flowers. Rocks, too. I don’t trust them. Sullen little *blëbers*.”

So the Brill twins had spent an afternoon scouring the facility for anything that might contain a bug. Even the recycling toilet scent blocks had to go, as Opal was convinced they were photographing her when she used the facilities.

Still, though, Mistress Koboï is right to be paranoid, Merv admitted as he barged through the lab double doors. If the LEP ever found out what she was doing here, they would lock her up forever and a day.

The double doors led to a long triple-height laboratory. It was a place of misery. Cages were stacked to the ceiling, each one filled with a trapped animal. They moaned and keened, rattling their

bars, butting the doors. A robot food-pellet dispensing machine whirred along the network, spitting gray pellets into the appropriate cages.

The center island was a series of operating pallets. Scores of animals lay sedated on the tables, secured, like Artemis, with rigid octobonds. Artemis caught sight of a Siberian tiger, paws in the air and bald patches shaved into its skull. On each patch there sat what looked like a tiny slice of liver. As they passed, one of the slices made a squelching sound, and a tiny light emitting diode on its ridge flashed red.

Merv stopped to peel it off, and Artemis saw to his horror that the thing's underside was spiked with a dozen dripping spines.

"Full to the brim, Mr. Super Genetically Modified Leech Mosquito thing. You are a disgusting abomination, yes you are. But you sure know how to siphon brain fluid. I'd say you're due for a squeezing."

Merv pumped a foot pedal to open a nearby fridge and finger-tinkled the beakers inside until he found the right one.

"Here we go. SibTig BF."

He placed the beaker on a chrome work surface, then squeezed the leech like a sponge until it surrendered its bounty of brain fluid. Afterward the leech was casually tossed into the trash.

"Love you lots," said Mervall, returning to Artemis's pallet. "Miss you loads."

Artemis saw everything through the slit of an open eye. This was a depraved, horrible place, and he had to get out of here.

Holly will come for me, he thought, and then: *No, she won't. She'll think I'm dead.*

This realization chilled his blood.

I went into the flames.

He would have to save himself, then. It would not be the first time. Stay alert; a chance will come and you must be ready to take it.

Mervall found room on the operating section and parked Artemis neatly in it.

"And he squeezes it into an impossible space. They said it couldn't be done. They were wrong. Mervall Brill is the king of trolley parking." The pixie belched. "Which is not the future I had in mind for myself as a younger pixie."

Then, somewhat moodily, he trawled a low-level aquarium with a perforated jug, until it was full of convulsing superleeches.

Oh no, thought Artemis. Oh, please.

And then he was forced to close his eyes as Mervall turned to face him.

Surely he will see my chest heaving. He will sedate me, and it will all be over.

But Mervall apparently did not notice. "Ooh, I hate you guys. Disgusting. I tell you something, human, if your subconscious can hear me, be glad you're asleep, because you do *not* want to go through this awake."

Artemis almost cracked then. But he thought of his mother, with less than a day left to her, and he kept silent.

He felt his left hand being tugged, and heard Mervall grunt.

"Stuck tight. Just a tick."

The grip loosened, and Artemis tracked Mervall's movement with his ears and nose. A brush of

soft belly on his elbow. Breath blowing past his ear. Mervall was at his left shoulder, reaching across.

Artemis opened his right eye just enough to roll his pupil into the slit. There was an operating light directly overhead, craned in above the operating table on a thick flat chrome arm.

Chrome. Reflective.

Artemis watched Mervall's actions in the surface. The pixie tapped the octobond's touch-sensitive control pad, revealing a Gnommish keyboard. Then, singing a popular pixie pop song, he tapped in his password. One number with each beat of the chorus.

“Pixies rock hard!” he sang. “Extreme pixie hard rock, baby.”

Which seemed unlikely to Artemis, but he was glad of the song, as it gave him time to file Mervall's pass code.

Mervall released one of the bonds, allowing him to extend Artemis's forearm. Even if the human did happen to wake up, all he could do was flail.

“Now, my little leech, do your nasty work for Aunt Opal, and I will reward you by squeezing your innards into a bucket.” He sighed. “Why are all my best lines wasted on annelids?”

He plucked a leech from the jug, pinched it to make the spines stick out, then slapped it onto Artemis's exposed wrist.

Artemis felt nothing but an immediate sense of wellbeing.

I'm being sedated, he realized. An old troll trick. Cheer you up before you die. It's a good trick, and anyway, how bad can dying be? My life has been one trial after another.

Mervall was checking his chronometer. His brother had been in that recycling cage behind the galley for an awfully long time. That red river hog might decide to have himself a bite of pixie meat.

“I'll just check,” he decided. “Be back before the leech is full. First blood, then brain. You should have complimented Mistress Opal's boots, brother.”

And off he toddled down the center aisle, plucking the mesh of each cage as he passed, driving the animals wild.

“Pixies rock hard!” he sang. “Extreme pixie hard rock, baby.”

Artemis was finding it hard to motivate himself. It felt so easy lying on the pallet, just letting all his troubles run out of his arm.

When you decide to die, Artemis thought sluggishly, it doesn't matter how many people want to kill you.

He did wish the animals would calm down. Their chattering and chirping were interfering with his mood.

There was even a parrot somewhere, squawking a phrase. “Who's your mama?” it asked over and over again. “Who's your mama?”

My mama is Angeline. She's dying.

Artemis's eyes opened.

Mama. Mother.

He lifted his free arm and bashed the unwelcome leech against one of the octobonds. It exploded in a spatter of mucus and blood, leaving half a dozen spines jutting from Artemis's arms like the spears of tiny soldiers.

That's going to hurt eventually.

Artemis's throat was dry, his neck was twisted, and his vision was impaired, but even so, it took

him barely a minute to activate the keypad with Mervall's code and retract the bonds.

If these are alarmed, I'm in trouble.

But there was no siren. No pixies came running.

I have time. But not much.

He picked the spines from his skin, wincing not from pain, but from the the sight of the red-rimmed holes in his wrist. A rivulet of blood ran from each wound, but it was slow and watery. He would not bleed to death.

Coagulant in the spines. Of course.

Artemis zombie-walked across the lab, gradually straightening out the kinks. There were hundreds of eyes on him. The animals were silent now, noses, beaks, and snouts pressed against the wire mesh, waiting to see what would develop. The only sound came from the food-pellet robot zipping through its routine.

All I need to do is escape. No need for confrontation or saving the world. Leave Opal be, and run away.

But of course in the world of Artemis Fowl, things are rarely straightforward. Artemis donned network goggles he found hanging from a low peg, activated the V-board, and used Mervall's password to log on to the network. He needed to know where he was and how to get out.

There were design plans to the entire facility stored on a desktop file. No security, no encryption. Why would there be? It wasn't as if any of the humans above would wander down, and even if they did, humans could not read Gnommish.

Artemis studied the plans with care and growing anxiety. The facility consisted of a series of interconnected modules housed in ancient tunnels beneath the Extinctionists' compound, but there were only two ways out. He could go out the way he had come in, which was not ideal, as it led straight back up to Kronski. Or he could choose the shuttleport on the lower level, which would mean stealing and piloting a shuttle. His chances of overriding complicated theft-prevention safeties before Opal had him vaporized were minimal. He would have to go up.

"Do you like my little laboratory?" said a voice.

Artemis stared past the goggle display. Opal stood before him, hands on hips.

"Quite a place, isn't it?" she continued in English. "All these tunnels were just here, waiting for us. Perfect. As soon as I found them, I knew I had to have them, which is why I persuaded Dr. Kronski to move here."

Information is power, thought Artemis. Don't give her any.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the future queen of this world, at the very least. You may refer to me as Mistress Koboi for the next five minutes. After that you may refer to me as *Aaaaarrrrgh*, hold your throat, die screaming, and so on."

As pompous as I remember.

"I seem to be bigger than you, Mistress Koboi. And as far as I can see, you have no weapons."

Opal laughed. "No weapons?" she cried, spreading her arms. "These creatures have given me all the weapons I need." She stroked the sleeping tiger. "This big kitty augments my mind control. Those sea slugs focus my energy beams. A shot of liquidized dolphin fin mixed with just the right amount of cobra venom turns the clock back a hundred years."

"This is a weapons factory," breathed Artemis.

“Exactly,” said Opal, gratified that *someone* finally understood. “Thanks to these animals and their fluids, I have become the most powerful magician since the demon warlocks. The Extinctionists have been rounding up the creatures I need. Fools. Tricked by a cheap blast of holographic flames. As if I would kill these wonderful creatures before I drained their juices. You humans are such idiots. Your governments spend their fortunes looking for power, when all the time it is cavorting around your jungles.”

“That’s quite a speech,” said Artemis, wiggling his fingers, tapping the V-board that only he could see.

“Soon I will be—”

“Don’t tell me, soon you will be invincible.”

“No, actually,” said Opal, with admirable patience. “Soon I will be able to manipulate time itself. All I need is the ...”

And suddenly everything fell into place for Artemis. Everything about this whole affair. And he knew he would be able to escape.

“The lemur. All you need is the lemur.”

Opal clapped. “Exactly, you bright Mud Boy. That wonderful lemur brain fluid is the last ingredient I need for my magic boosting formula.”

Artemis sighed. “Magic boosting formula? Listen to yourself.”

Opal missed the mocking tone, possibly because she didn’t hear it a lot. “I had a whole bunch of lemurs before, but the LEP appropriated them to cure some plague, and I lost the rest in a fire. All my test subjects gone, and their fluids are quite impossible to replicate. There is *one* left, and I need him. He is my cloning model. With that lemur I will control time itself.” Opal stopped speaking for a moment, tapping her bow lips with a finger. “Wait a moment, human. What do you know of my lemur?” She took the finger away from her mouth and ignited a pulsing sphere of flame at its tip, melting her nail varnish. “I asked you, what do you know of my lemur?”

“Nice boots,” said Artemis, then selected an option on the goggle screen with a flick of his finger. *Are you sure you wish to open all the cages?* asked the computer.

The Extinctionists were sneaking back into the compound, led by the intrepid Tommy Kirkenhazard, who brandished his empty pistol with decidedly more bravado than he felt.

“I got stuff in that compound,” he repeatedly told the mass huddled behind him. “Expensive stuff. And I ain’t leaving it behind.”

Most of the rest had *expensive stuff* too, and now that Kronski was catatonic in the souk, and his guards seemed to have fled with their sparkling booty, this seemed the best time to reclaim their belongings and head for the airport.

Much to Kirkenhazard’s relief, the compound appeared to be utterly deserted, though the gelatinous group was spooked several times by night shadows jumping in the Moroccan wind.

I ain’t never shot nothing with an empty gun, he thought. But I don’t imagine it’s too effective.

They reached the door to the main hall, which hung from its frame on a single hinge.

“Okay, folks,” said Kirkenhazard. “There ain’t no porters around to carry our stuff, so you got to hump it yourselves.”

“Oh, my lord,” said Contessa Irina Kostovich, and swooned into the arms of a Scottish oil baron.

“Gather whatever you can, and we meet back here in fifteen minutes.”

The contessa was muttering something.

“What was that?” asked Kirkenhazard.

“She said she has a pedicure booked for the morning.”

Kirkenhazard held up a hand, listening. “No. Not that. Does anyone else hear rumbling?”

The animals charged through the open cage doors with savage glee, hopping, jumping, flying, and sliming. Lions, leopards, various monkeys, parrots, gazelles, hundreds of creatures all with one idea in mind: *Escape*.

Opal was not amused.

“I cannot believe you did that, Mud Person. I will wring your brain out like a sponge.”

Artemis ducked his head low, not caring at all for the brain/sponge imagery. If he avoided Opal’s regal stare, then she could not *mesmerize* him. Unless her augmented powers allowed her access to the brain without the conduit of the optic nerve.

Even if he had not ducked, he would have been shielded by the tide of creatures that engulfed him, snapping, buffeting, and kicking.

This is ridiculous, he thought as a monkey’s elbow drove the air from his lungs. If Opal does not get me, the animals will. I need to direct this stampede.

Artemis squatted behind one of the operating tables, pulling out the tiger’s anaesthetic drip as he passed, and squinted through the spokes of passing legs for an appropriate animal.

Opal roared at the creatures in an amalgamation of their tongues. It was a piercing sound and split the animal phalanx down the center so that it flowed around her. As the herd passed, Opal took potshots with pulsing blasts of energy that erupted from her fingers, and scythed through entire rows of creatures, knocking them senseless to the ground. Cages tumbled like building blocks, refrigerators spewed their contents across the tiles.

My distraction is being chopped down, thought Artemis. Time for an exit.

He spied a set of hooves stomping toward him, and steadied himself for a jump.

It’s a quagga, he realized. Half horse, half zebra, and there hasn’t been one in captivity for a hundred years. Not exactly a thoroughbred stallion, but it will have to do.

The ride was a little rougher than Artemis was accustomed to on the Fowl Arabians. No steadying stirrups, no creaking saddle, no snapping reins. Not to mention the fact that the quagga was unbroken and scared out of its wits.

Artemis patted its neck.

Ludicrous, he thought. This entire affair. A dead boy escaping on an extinct animal.

Artemis grabbed tufts of the quagga’s mane and tried to direct it toward the open doorway. It bucked and kicked, whipping its striped head around to nip at Artemis with strong, square teeth. He dug in his heels and held on.

Opal was busy protecting herself from a wave of animal vengeance. Some of the larger predators were not as cowed as their cousins, and decided that the best way to remove the threat posed by Opal Koboï was to eat her.

The tiny pixie twirled like a demonic ballerina, shooting blasts of magical energy that ballooned at her shoulders, gathered force in roiling spheres at her elbows, and shot forth with liquid pulsations.

Artemis had never seen anything like it. Stricken animals simply froze in midair, their momentum utterly drained, dropping to the ground like statues, immobile but for their terrified rolling eyes.

She is powerful indeed. I have never seen a force like this. Opal must never be allowed to capture Jayjay.

Opal was running out of magic. Her bolts fizzled out or spiraled off target like errant squibs. She abandoned them and drew two pistols from her belt. One was immediately batted from her hand by the tiger that had lumbered to join the fray, but Opal did not submit to hysteria and quickly thumbed that other gun to a broad-spread setting and slashed the barrel from side to side as she fired, releasing a fan of silver energy.

The tiger was the first to drop, with a look on its face that said *Not again*. Several more followed, cut off in midscreech, howl, or hiss.

Artemis hauled back on the quagga's spiked mane, jumping it onto an operating table. The beast snorted and complained but did as it was bid, skittering the length of one table and leaping across to the next.

Opal loosed a shot in their direction, but it was absorbed by a brace of condors.

The door was directly before them, and Artemis feared the quagga would falter. But no, it butted through to the corridor connecting the lab to the holographic flame chamber.

Artemis quickly opened the control panel in his stolen network goggles and chose the ramp setting.

It took maddening moments for the platform to extend itself, and for those seconds Artemis rode the quagga around in circles to take its mind off dislodging the unwelcome rider on its back and to make them both a more difficult target if Opal followed them through the corridor.

An eagle swooped by, its feathers raking Artemis's cheek. A muskrat clambered along his torso, hopping to the rising platform.

There was light above. The sickly wavering beams of a faulty strip light. But light nevertheless.

"Come on, girl," said Artemis, feeling very much the cowboy. "Yee-haw."

The Extinctionists gathered around Tommy Kirkenhazard's raised finger, listening intently as if the noise emanated from inside the finger.

"Ah, I don't hear nothing," admitted Tommy. "I must have been dreaming. After all, it's been a stressful night for human-lovers."

Then the lodge burst open, and the Extinctionists were utterly engulfed in a sea of beasts.

Kirkenhazard went down under a couple of Chacma baboons, vainly pulling the trigger on his empty gun and shouting over and over: "But we killed you, darn it. We killed you."

Though there would be no fatalities in the compound that night, eighteen people were hospitalized with bites, skin burns, broken bones, and various infestations. Kirkenhazard fared the worst. The baboons ate his gun and the hand holding it, and then turned the unfortunate man over to a groggy tiger, who found himself waking in a very bad mood.

Not one of the Extinctionists noticed a small, dark craft rising silently from behind one of the chalets. It flew across the central park and scooped up a long-haired youth from the back of what looked like a small striped donkey. The craft spun in a tight arc like a stone in a sling, then hurtled into the night sky as though it had to be somewhere in a real hurry.

Pedicures, and indeed all spa treatments, were canceled for the next day.

Opal was desolate to find that, on top of everything else, her boots were ruined.

“What is that stain?” she demanded of Mervall and his recently liberated twin, Descant.

“Dunno,” muttered Descant, who was still a bit moody from his time in the cage.

“It’s a dropping of some kind,” volunteered Mervall quickly. “Judging from the size and texture, I would say one of the big cats got a little nervous.”

Opal sat on a bench and extended the boot. “Pull it off, Mervall.”

She placed her sole on Mervall’s forehead and pushed until he tumbled backward, clutching the dropping-laden footwear.

“That Mud Boy. He knows about my lemur. We must follow him. He is tagged, I take it.”

“Oh yes,” confirmed Mervall. “All the newcomers are sprayed on landing. There’s a radioactive tracer in his every pore right now. Harmless, but there’s nowhere on this planet that he can hide from us.”

“Good. Excellent, in fact. I think of everything, do I not?”

“You do, mistress,” droned Descant. “Brilliant, you are. Astounding is your fabulosity.”

“Why, thank you, Descant,” said Opal, as ever oblivious to sarcasm. “And I thought you’d be upset after the pigpen. Fabulosity isn’t a word, by the way. In case you’re thinking of writing how wonderful I am in your diary.”

“Point taken,” Descant said seriously.

Opal offered her other foot to Mervall. “Good. Now set the self-destructs on this place and let’s get the shuttle prepped. I want to find this human and kill him immediately. We were too nice last time, with the leeches. This time, immediate death.”

Mervall winced. He was holding two boots covered in tiger droppings, and he’d prefer to wear those than be in that human’s shoes.

Artemis lay flat on his back in the cargo hold, wondering if he could possibly have dreamed the past few minutes. Superleeches, sleeping tigers, and a grumpy quagga.

He felt the floor vibrate beneath him and knew that they were moving at several times the speed of sound. Suddenly the vibration disappeared, to be replaced by a far more sedate hum. They were slowing down!

Artemis hurried to the cockpit, where Holly was glaring at a readout as if she could change the information displayed there. Jayjay was in the copilot’s seat and seemed to be in charge of steering.

Artemis pointed at the lemur. “This may seem like a silly question, but is Jayjay . . .”

“No. Autopilot. And nice to see you alive, by the way. You’re welcome for the rescue.”

Artemis touched her shoulder. “Once again, I owe you my life. Now, I hate to move directly from gratitude to petulance, but why have we slowed down? Time is running out. We had three days, remember? There are only hours left.”

Holly tapped the readout. “We were pinged by something at the compound. Someone’s computers have downloaded our schematics. Can you tell me any more about that?”

“Opal Koboi,” said Artemis. “Opal is behind everything. She’s harvesting animal fluids to increase her own magic. If she gets her hands on Jayjay, she’ll be invincible.”

Holly did not have time to be incredulous. “That’s wonderful. Opal Koboi. I knew this little trip was missing a psychotic element. If Opal pinged us, then she’ll be on our tail in something a little more war-worthy than this clunker.”

“Shields?”

“Nothing much. We might fool human radar but not fairy scanners.”

“What can we do?”

“I need to keep us up here in the air lanes with all the human traffic. We stay subsonic and don’t draw attention to ourselves. Then at the last moment we make a break for Fowl Manor. It won’t matter if Opal sees us then, because by the time she catches us, we’ll be back in the time stream.”

Mulch Diggums poked his head through from the mail box. “Nothing much in here. A few gold coins. What say I keep them? And did I hear someone mention Opal Koboi?”

“Don’t worry about it. Everything is under control.”

Mulch guffawed. “Under control? Like Rathdown Park was under control. Like the leather souk was under control.”

“You’re not seeing us at our best,” Artemis admitted. “But in time you will come to respect Captain Short and me.”

Mulch’s expression doubted it. “I’d better go and look up *respect* in the dictionary, because it mustn’t mean what I think it means, eh, Jayjay?”

The lemur clapped his delicate hands and chattered with what sounded like laughter.

“It looks like you’ve found an intellectual equal, Mulch,” said Holly, returning to her instruments. “It’s a pity he isn’t a girl; then you could marry him.”

Mulch imitated shock. “Romance outside your species. Now *that’s* disgusting. What kind of weirdo would kiss someone when they weren’t even part of the same species?”

Artemis massaged his suddenly pounding temples.

It’s a long way to Tipperary, he thought. And then a few more miles to Dublin.

“A shuttle?” said Opal. “A fairy shuttle?”

The Koboi craft was hovering at an altitude of thirty miles, tipping the border of space. Starlight winked on the hull of their matte-black shuttle, and the earth hung below them wearing a stole of clouds.

“That’s what the sensors show,” said Mervall. “An old mining model. Not much under the hood, and zero firepower. We should be able to catch it.”

“Should?” said Opal, stretching an ankle to admire her new red boots. “Why should?”

“Well, we had her for a while. Then she went subsonic. I would guess their pilot is riding the human flight lanes until they feel safe.”

Opal smiled devilishly. She liked a challenge.

“Okay, let’s give ourselves every advantage. We have the speed and we have the weapons. All we need is to point ourselves in the right direction.”

“What an incrediferous idea.” Descant smirked.

Opal was pained. “Please, Descant. Use short words. Don’t force me to vaporize you.”

This was a hollow threat, as Opal had not been able to produce so much as a spark since the compound. She still had the basics—mind control, levitation, that kind of thing—but she would need

some serious bed rest before she could muster a lightning bolt. The Brills did not need to know that, though.

“Here’s my idea. I ran the lab tapes through voice recognition and got a regional match. Whoever that Mud Boy is, he lives in central Ireland. Probably Dublin. I want you to get us down there as fast as you can, Descant, and when that mining shuttle drops out of the air lanes”— Opal closed her tiny fingers around an imaginary ant, squeezing the blood from its body—“We will be waiting.”

“Fabulicious,” said Descant.

Fowl Manor, Dublin, Ireland

The sun had risen and was sinking again by the time Holly had dragged the spluttering shuttle over the Fowl Estate wall.

“We’re close to the deadline, and this piece of junk is close to dead,” she said to Artemis. Holly placed a hand on her heart. “I can feel N^o1’s spark dying inside, but there’s still time.”

Artemis nodded. The sight of the manor somehow made his mother’s plight seem even more urgent.

I have to go home.

“Well done, Holly. You did it. Set us down in the rear courtyard. We can access the house by the kitchen door.”

Holly pressed a few buttons. “Around the back it is. Scanning for alarms. Found two and a sneaky third. Motion sensors, if I’m not mistaken. Only one alarm is being remotely monitored, and the other two are self-contained. Should I disable the remote alarm?”

“Yes, Holly, please disable the alarm. Anybody home?”

Holly checked the thermal imaging. “One warm body. Top floor.”

Artemis sighed, relieved. “Good. Just Mother. She will have taken her sleeping tablets by now. *Little me* can’t be back yet.”

Holly set the shuttle down as gently as she could, but the gears were stripped and the suspension bags were drained. There were dents in the stabilizers, and the gyroscope was spinning like a weather vane. The landing gear stripped a channel of cobblestones from the courtyard surface, tumbling them like bricks of turf before the plow.

Artemis gathered Jayjay in his arms.

“Are you ready for more adventures, little man?”

The lemur’s round eyes were filled with anxiety, and he looked to Mulch for reassurance.

“Always remember,” said Mulch, tickling the creature’s chin, “that *you* are the smart one.”

The dwarf found an old duffel bag and began stuffing the remaining contents of the fridge inside.

“No need for that,” said Holly. “The ship is yours. Take it, dig up your booty, and fly far away. Dump this heap in the sea and live off your earnings for a few years. Just promise me that you won’t sell to humans.”

“Only the junk,” said Mulch. “And did you say that I could keep the shuttle?”

“Actually, I’m asking you to scrap it. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

Mulch grinned. “I’m a generous person. I could do you a favor.”

Holly smiled back. “Good. And remember, when we meet again, none of this ever happened, or it

probably won't."

"My lips are sealed."

Artemis squeezed past him. "Now, there's something I would pay to see. Mulch Diggums with his mouth closed."

"Yes, nice meeting you too, Mud Boy. I look forward to robbing you in the future."

Artemis shook his hand. "I look forward to it myself, believe it or not. We will have some fine times."

Jayjay reached out for a handshake. "You look after the human, Jayjay," said Mulch seriously. "He's a bit dim, but he means well."

"Good-bye, Mr. Diggums."

"Later, Master Fowl."

Opal was on her third round of the Gola Schweem meditative circle chant when Mervall burst into her private chamber.

"We found the shuttle, mistress," he panted, clutching a flexi-screen to his chest. "They went supersonic for barely a minute over the Mediterranean. But it was enough."

"Humm humm haaa. Rahmumm humm haaaa," intoned Opal, finishing her chant. "Peace be inside me, tolerance all around me, forgiveness in my path. Now, Mervall, show me where the filthy human is so that I may feed him his organs."

Mervall proffered the flexi-screen. "Red dot. East coast."

"Military?"

"No, surprisingly. It's a residence. No defenses whatsoever."

Opal climbed out of her snuggle-me chair. "Good. Run a few scans. Warm up the cannons and get me down there."

"Yes, mistress."

"And Mervall?"

"Mistress?"

"I think little Descant has a crush on me. He told me earlier that I was very phototractive. Poor little simpleton. Could you tell him that I am unavailable? If you don't, I shall have to have him killed."

Merv sighed. "I shall tell him, mistress. I feel sure he will be disconnipted."

Artemis found himself scratching Jayjay's head as they moved through the manor.

"Be calm, little chap. No one can hurt you now. We're safe."

Holly was behind him on the stairs, guarding the rear, two fingers rigidly extended. The fingers were not a loaded weapon, but they could break bones with enough momentum behind them.

"Come on, Artemis. N^o1 is weaker now, so we have to jump soon."

Artemis stepped around a weight-sensitive pad on the twelfth step. "Nearly there. Seconds away."

His study was exactly as he had left it, the wardrobe still open, a scarf drooping from the top shelf like an escaping snake.

"Good," said Artemis, his confidence growing. "This is the spot. The exact spot."

Holly was panting. “About time. I’m having trouble holding on to the signal. It’s like running after a smell.”

Artemis put an arm around her shoulder. A group of three; tired, hungry, but excited.

Holly’s shoulders shook with an exhaustion and tension she had kept hidden until now.

“I thought you were dead,” she said.

“Me too,” admitted Artemis. “Then I realized that I couldn’t die, not in this time.”

“I presume you’re going to explain that to me.”

“Later. Over supper. Now can we open the time stream, friend?”

There was a sudden swish as the bay window curtain slid back. Young Artemis and Butler were there, both wearing foil suits. Butler unzipped his suit to reveal a large gun strapped across his chest.

“What was that about a time stream?” asked ten-year-old Artemis.

Mulch Diggums was burying a gold coin as a sacrifice to Shammy, the dwarf god of good fortune, when the earth exploded underneath him, and he found himself straddling the blade of a shuttle icebreaker prow.

I never even heard that coming, he thought. And then:

So much for Shammy.

Before he could gather himself sufficiently to figure up from down, Mulch found himself tumbled to the base of a silver ash tree, with the barrel of a Neutrino restricting the movement of his Adam’s apple. His beard hairs instinctively realized that the gun was not friendly, and twined themselves around the barrel.

“Nice shuttle,” said Mulch, playing for time until the stars in his vision flickered out. “Whisper engine, I’m guessing.”

Three pixies stood before him. Two males and a female. Generally, pixies were not very threatening creatures, but the males were armed and the female had a look in her eyes.

“I bet,” said Mulch, “that you would set the world on fire just to watch it burn.”

Opal tapped the suggestion into a small electronic notepad on her pocket computer.

“Thanks for that. Now, tell me everything.”

I’ll resist for a minute, then feed her some misinformation, thought Mulch.

“I’ll tell you nothing, pixie she-devil,” he said, Adam’s apple knocking nervously against the gun barrel.

“Oooh,” said Opal, stamping with frustration. “Isn’t anyone afraid of me?”

She stripped off a glove and placed a thumb on Mulch’s temple. “Now, show me everything.”

And with a few remaining sparks of ill-gotten magic, she sucked every memory of the past few days from Mulch’s brain. It was an extremely unpleasant sensation, even for someone used to expelling large amount of material from his person. Mulch gibbered and bucked as the last few days were vacuumed from his head. When Opal had what she wanted, the dwarf was left unconscious in the mud.

He would wake up an hour later with the starter chip for an LEP shuttle in his pocket and no idea how he’d gotten there.

Opal closed her eyes and flicked through her new memories.

“Ah,” she said, smiling. “A time stream.”

“There isn’t time for this,” insisted Artemis. “I think there is,” argued ten-year-old Artemis. “You have broken into my house again; the least you can do is explain that time stream comment. Not to mention the fact that you are alive.”

Artemis the elder flicked his hair away from his face.

“You must recognize me now. Surely.”

“This is not a shampoo commercial. Please stop flicking your hair.”

Holly was bent almost double, her hand on her heart.

“Hurry,” she groaned, “or I’ll have to go without you.”

“Please,” Artemis pleaded. “We need to go. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Young Artemis was unmoved. “I had a feeling you would be back. This is where it all began, right on this spot. I reviewed the security tapes, and you simply appeared in this room. Then you followed me to Africa, so I thought if I saved the creature’s life you might end up back here with my lemur. We simply blocked our heat signatures and waited. And here you are.”

“That’s pretty flimsy reasoning,” said Artemis the elder. “We were obviously after the lemur. Once we had the lemur, why would we return here?”

“I realize the logic was flawed, but I had nothing to lose. And, as we can see, a lot to gain.”

Holly did not have the patience for a Fowl gloating session. “Artemis, I know you have a heart. You’re a good person even if you don’t know it yet. You sacrificed your diamonds to save my life. What will it take for you to let us go?”

Young Artemis considered this for an infuriating minute and a half.

“The truth,” he said eventually. “I need to know the absolute truth about all of this. What kind of creature are *you*? Why does *he* look so familiar? What makes the lemur so special? Everything.”

Artemis the elder clutched Jayjay to his chest. “Get me a pair of scissors,” he said.

Opal ran into the manor, casually squashing the magical nausea that flared upon entering a human dwelling without permission.

A time stream, she thought, almost giggling with excitement. Finally I can test my theories.

The manipulation of time had long been Opal’s ultimate goal. To be able to control one’s passage through time was the greatest power. But her magic was not strong enough without the lemur. It took teams of LEP warlocks to slow time down for a few hours; the magic required to open a door to the tunnel was stupendous. It would be easier to shoot down the moon.

Opal tapped this into her notepad.

Reminder. Shoot down the moon? Viable?

But if she could gain entrance to the tunnel, Opal felt sure that she would quickly master the science involved.

It’s more than likely an intuitive organism; and after all, I am a genius.

She scaled the stairs, mindless of the scuff marks the high human steps inflicted on her new boots. Mervall and Descant trailed behind, surprised at this lack of footwear prudence.

“I got thrown into the pigpen for boots,” muttered Descant. “Now she’s scratching those ones on the stairs. Typical Koboian inconsistency. I think I’m getting an ulcer.”

Opal reached the upper landing and raced immediately through an open doorway.

“How does she know that’s the right room?” wondered Descant.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mervall, resting his hands on his knees. Scaling human steps is not easy for pixies. Big heads, short legs, tiny lungs. “Maybe it’s the magical red glow coming from the doorway, or perhaps it’s the deafening howl of the temporal winds.”

Descant nodded. “You could be right, brother. And don’t think I don’t know sarcasm when I hear it.”

Opal traipsed from the room, her expression sour.

“They have gone,” she announced. “And the tunnel is about to close. Also my boots are ruined. So, boys, I am looking for someone to blame.”

The Brill brothers took one look at each other, then turned and ran as fast as their tiny legs would carry them.

Not fast enough.

THE HOLE IN THE ACE

Holly felt herself relax as soon as they entered the stream.

Safe for the moment.

Jayjay was safe. Soon Artemis's mother would be well, and when that was accomplished, Holly decided that she would punch her erstwhile friend in his smug face.

I did what I had to do, Artemis had said. And I would do it again.

And she had kissed him. Kissed him!

Holly understood Artemis's motives, but it wounded her deeply that he had felt the need to blackmail her.

I would have helped anyway. Definitely.

Would you? Would you have disobeyed orders? Was Artemis right to do it his way?

These were questions that Holly knew would haunt her for years. If she had years left to her.

The journey was more arduous than before. The time stream was eroding her sense of self, and there was a syrupy temptation to relax her concentration. Her world seemed less important wrapped in its sparkling waves. Being part of an eternal river would be a pleasant way to exist. And if the fairy races were wiped out by plague, what of it?

N^o1's presence pricked her consciousness and bolstered her resolve. The little demon's power was evident in the stream, a shimmering thread of crimson pulling them on through the miasma. Things moved in the shadows. Darting, sharp things. Holly sensed teeth and hooked fingers.

Had N^o1 mentioned something about quantum zombies? That was probably a joke. Please let that be a joke.

Concentrate! Holly told herself. Or you will be absorbed.

She could feel other presences traveling with her. Jayjay was surprisingly calm, considering his surroundings. Somewhere in the periphery was Artemis, his sense of purpose keen as a blade.

N^o1 is going to get a shock, thought Holly, when he sees us pop through.

N^o1 didn't seem very shocked when the group tumbled from the stream, solidifying on the floor of Artemis's study.

"See any zombies?" he asked with a spooky wiggling of his fingers.

"Thank the gods," proclaimed Foaly from the television screens, then exhaled loudly through his

broad nostrils. “That was the longest ten seconds of my life. Did you get the lemur?”

There was no need for an answer, as Jayjay decided he liked the sound of Foaly’s voice and gave the nearest screen a lick. The little primate’s tongue crackled, and he scampered back, shooting Foaly a glare.

“One lemur,” said the centaur. “No female?”

Holly shook the stars from her eyes, the fog from her brain. The stream lingered in her head like the last moments of sleep.

“No. No female. You’ll have to clone him.”

Foaly peered past Holly to the shuddering form on the ground behind her.

The centaur raised an eyebrow.

“I see we have an—”

“Let’s talk about that later,” said Holly sharply, interrupting the centaur. “For now we have work to do.”

Foaly nodded thoughtfully. “I’m guessing, from the look of things, that Artemis has a plan of some sort. Is that going to be a problem for us?”

“Only if we try to stop it,” said Holly.

Artemis took Jayjay into his arms, stroking the little lemur’s Mohawk and calming him with a rhythmic clicking of his tongue.

Holly felt that she too would be calmed—not by Artemis’s clicking, but by the sight of her own face in the mirror. She was herself again; her one-piece fit snugly. A grown woman. No more teenage confusion. She would feel even better once she retrieved her gear. There was nothing like a Neutrino on the hip for a self-confidence boost.

“Time to see Mother,” said Artemis grimly, selecting a suit from the wardrobe. “How much fluid should I administer?”

“It’s powerful stuff,” said Foaly, entering some calculations on his keyboard. “Two cc’s. No more. There is a syringe gun in Holly’s medi-kit on the bedside table. Be very careful with the brain drain. There’s an anaesthetic tab in there too. Give Jayjay a swab, and he won’t feel a thing.”

“Very well,” Artemis said, pocketing the kit. “I shall go in alone. I do hope Mother recognizes me.”

“So do I,” agreed Holly. “Or she may object to lemur brain juice being injected into her by a total stranger.”

Artemis’s hand hovered over the crystal doorknob on his parents’ bedroom door. In its facets he could see a dozen reflections of his own face. Each one was drawn and worried.

Last chance. My last chance to save her.

I am forever trying to save people, he thought. I’m supposed to be a criminal. Where did it all go wrong?

No time for drifting. There was more at stake here than gold or notoriety. His mother was dying, and her salvation was perched on Artemis’s shoulder, searching his scalp for ticks.

Artemis closed his fingers over the knob. Not another moment to waste on thoughts; time now for action.

The room seemed colder than he remembered, but this was doubtless his imagination.

All minds play tricks. Even mine. The perceived cold is a projection of my mood, nothing more.

His parents' bedroom was rectangular in shape, stretching along the west wing from front to rear. It was actually more of an apartment than a room, with a lounge area and office corner. The large four-poster bed was angled so that tinted light from a medieval stained-glass porthole would fall across the studded headboard in summer.

Artemis placed his feet carefully on the rug, like a ballet dancer, avoiding the vine pattern in the weave.

Step on a vine, count to nine.

Bad luck was the last thing he needed.

Angeline Fowl was splayed on the bed, as though thrown there. Her head was angled back so sharply that the line from her neck to her chin was almost straight, and her skin was pale enough to seem translucent.

She's not breathing, thought Artemis, panic fluttering in his chest like a caged bird. I was wrong. I am too late.

Then his mother's entire frame convulsed as she dragged down a painful breath.

Artemis's resolve almost left him. His legs were boneless rubber and his forehead burned.

This is my mother. How can I do what needs to be done?

But he would do it. There wasn't anyone else who could.

Artemis reached his mother's side and gently pushed strands of hair back from her face.

"I am here, Mother. Everything will be fine. I found a cure."

Somehow, Angeline Fowl heard her son's words, and her eyes flickered open. Even her irises had lost their color, fading to the ice blue of a winter lake.

"Cure," she sighed. "My little Arty found the cure."

"That's right," said Artemis. "Little Arty found the cure. It was the lemur. Remember, the Madagascan lemur from Rathdown Park?"

Angeline raised a bone-thin finger, tickling the air before Jayjay's nose. "Little lemur. Cure."

Jayjay, unsettled by the bedridden woman's skeletal appearance, ducked behind Artemis's head.

"Nice lemur," said Angeline, a weak smile twitching her lips.

I am the parent now, thought Artemis. She is the child.

"Can I hold him?"

Artemis took a half-step back. "No, Mother. Not yet. Jayjay is a very important creature. This little fellow could save the world."

Angeline spoke through her teeth. "Let me hold him. Just for a moment."

Jayjay crawled down the back of Artemis's jacket, as though he understood the request and did not want to be held.

"Please, Arty. It would comfort me to hold him."

Artemis nearly handed the lemur over. Nearly.

"Holding him will not cure you, Mother. I need to inject some fluid into one of your veins."

Angeline seemed to be regaining her strength. She inched backward, sliding her head up the headboard. "Don't you want to make me happy, Arty?"

"I prefer *healthy* to happy for the moment," said Artemis, making no move to hand over the

lemur.

“Don’t you love me, son?” crooned Angeline. “Don’t you love your mommy?”

Artemis moved briskly, tearing open the medi-kit and closing his fingers around the transfusion gun, a single tear rolling down his pale cheek.

“I love you, Mother. I love you more than life. If you could only know what I have been through to find little Jayjay. Just be still for five seconds, then this nightmare will be over.”

Angeline’s eyes were crafty slits. “I don’t want you to inject me, Artemis. You’re not a trained nurse. Wasn’t there a doctor here, or was I dreaming that?”

Artemis primed the gun, waiting for the charge light to flash green. “I *have* administered shots before, Mother. I gave you your medicine more than once the last time you were . . . ill.”

“Artemis!” snapped Angeline, the flat of her hand slapping the sheet. “I demand that you give the lemur to me now! This instant! And summon the doctor.”

Artemis plucked a vial from the medi-kit. “You are hysterical, Mother. Not yourself. I think I should give you a sedative before I administer the antidote.” He slid the vial into the gun and reached for his mother’s arm.

“No,” Angeline virtually screeched, slapping him away with surprising strength. “Don’t touch me with your LEP sedatives, you stupid boy.”

Artemis froze. “LEP, Mother? What do you know of the LEP?”

Angeline tugged her lip, a guilty child. “What? Did I say LEP? Three letters, no more. They mean nothing to me.”

Artemis took another step away from the bed, gathering Jayjay protectively in his arms.

“Tell me the truth, Mother. What is happening here?”

Angeline abandoned her innocent act, pounding the mattress with delicate fists and squealing in frustration.

“I despise you, Artemis Fowl. You bothersome human. How I loathe you.”

Not words one expects to hear from one’s mother.

Angeline lay flat on the bed, steaming with rage. Literally steaming. Her eyeballs rolled in their sockets, and tendons stood out like steel cables on her arms and neck. All the time she ranted.

“When I have the lemur I will crush you all. The LEP, Foaly, Julius Root, all of you. I will send laser dogs down every tunnel in the earth’s crust until I flush out that odious dwarf. And as for that female captain, I will brainwash her and make her my slave.” She cast a hateful look at Artemis. “Fitting revenge, don’t you agree, *my son*.” The last two words dripped from her lips like poison from a viper’s fangs.

Artemis held Jayjay close; he could feel the small creature shivering against his chest. Or perhaps the shivering was his own.

“Opal,” he said. “You followed us home.”

“Finally!” shouted Artemis’s mother, in Opal’s voice. “The great boy genius sees the truth.” Angeline’s limbs stiffened, and she levitated from the bed, surrounded by a roiling mist of steam. Her pale blue eyes cut through the fog, spearing Artemis with their mad glare.

“Did you think you could win? Did you believe that the battle *was* won? How charmingly deluded. You do not even possess magic. I, on the other hand, have more magic than any other fairy since the demon warlocks. And once I have the lemur, I will be immortal.”

Artemis rolled his eyes. “Don’t forget invincible.”

“I haaate you!” squealed Opal/Angeline. “When I have the lemur, I will ... I will ...”

“Kill me in some horrible fashion,” suggested Artemis.

“Precisely. Thank you.”

Angeline’s body pivoted stiffly until she hovered upright, her halo of charged hair brushing the ceiling.

“Now,” she said, pointing a skeletal finger at the cowering Jayjay, “give me that creature.”

Artemis wrapped the lemur in his jacket. “Come and get him,” he said.

In the study, Holly was running through Artemis’s theory.

“That’s it?” said N⁰1 when Holly had finished explaining. “You’re not forgetting some crucial detail? Like the part that makes sense?”

“The whole thing is ridiculous.” interjected Foaly from the monitors. “Come on, fairies. We’ve done our part. Time to head belowground.”

“Soon,” said Holly. “Let’s just give Artemis five minutes to check it out. All we need to do is be alert.”

Foaly’s sigh crackled through the speakers. “Well, at least let me raise the shuttle. The troops are holding at Tara, waiting for a callback.”

Holly thought about this. “That’s good. You do that. Whatever happens, we need to be ready to move out. And when you’re finished, do a sweep of the estate, see where that nurse is.”

Foaly’s focus shifted left, while he put a call in to Tara.

Holly pointed at N⁰1. “You just have a little of that signature magic dancing on your fingertips in case we need it. I won’t feel completely safe until Angeline is well, and we’re drinking sim-coffee in a Haven bar.”

N⁰1 raised his hands, and soon they were enveloped in ripples of red power. “No problem, Holly. I’m ready for anything.”

It was a statement that was missing an *almost*.

In the same split second, the monitors blacked out and the door burst open with a force that actually drove the doorknob into the wall. Butler’s huge frame filled the gap.

Holly’s smile slipped when she noticed the pistol in the bodyguard’s fist and the mirrored sunglasses covering his eyes.

He’s armed and doesn’t want to be mesmerized.

Holly was quick, but Butler was quicker, and he had the element of surprise; after all, he was supposed to be on his way to China. Holly went for her gun, but Butler was there before her, ripping the Neutrino from her hip.

We have other tricks, thought Holly. We have magic. N⁰1 will knock your socks off.

Butler dragged something into the room on a trolley. A steel barrel with runes etched on the metal.

What’s this? What’s he doing?

N⁰1 managed to get off a single bolt; indoor lightning that scorched Butler’s shirt, knocking him back a pace. But even as he stumbled backward, the bodyguard swung the trolley past him,

slingshotting it into the room. A thick slime slobbered from its open mouth, splashing on N^o1's legs. The barrel trundled forward, knocking Holly and N^o1 aside like skittles.

N^o1 stared at his fingers as the magic on each tip winked out like candles in a breeze.

"I don't feel so great," he groaned, then keeled over, eyes flickering, lips muttering ancient spells that did not one iota of good.

What is in that barrel? wondered Holly, releasing her suit's wings from their sheath. Butler grabbed Holly's ankle as she ascended, flipping her ignominiously into the barrel. She felt the thick gunk close over her like a wet fist, blocking her nose and filling her throat.

The smell was repulsive.

Animal fat, she realized with a spasmodic shudder of horror. Pure rendered fat with a few hexes stirred into it.

Animal fat had been used as a magic suppressor for millennia. Even the most powerful warlock was helpless when dipped in rendered fat. You throw a warlock in a barrel of fat, seal it with woven willow bark, and bury it in a consecrated human graveyard, then that warlock is as helpless as a kitten in a sack. The experience would be made even more terrible by the fact that most fairies are devout vegetarians and would be perfectly aware of how many animals had to die to produce an entire barrel of fat.

Who told Butler about this? Holly wondered. Who is controlling him?

Then N^o1 was jammed in beside her, and the fat level rose to cover their heads. Holly surged upward, clearing her eyes just in time to see a lid bearing down on the barrel mouth, eclipsing the ceiling light.

No helmet, she lamented. I wish I had my helmet.

Then the lid was on and sealed. The fat found the neck hole in her one-piece and wormed inside, probing her face and invading her ears. Hexes swirled like malevolent snakes, keeping her magic at bay.

Lost, thought Holly. The worst death I can imagine. Sealed in a small space. Like my mother.

N^o1 convulsed beside her. The little warlock must feel like his soul was being sucked right out of him.

Holly panicked. She kicked and fought, bruising her elbows and tearing the skin from her knees. Where magic tried to heal her wounds, the hex snakes zoomed in, swallowing the sparks.

She almost opened her mouth to scream. The merest thread of reason stopped her. Then something brushed against her face. A corrugated tube. There were two.

Breathing tubes . . .

With frantic fingers, Holly felt her way to the end of a tube. She fought her natural instinct to jam it into N^o1's mouth.

In the event of an emergency, always take care of yourself first before you attend to civilians.

So Holly used her absolute last puff of air to clear the pipe as a diver would clear his snorkel. She imagined blobs of fat spraying the room outside.

I hope Butler's suit is ruined, she thought.

No choice now but to inhale. Air whistled down to her, mixed with wormy slivers of fat. Holly blew again, clearing the last traces of gunk.

Now for N^o1. His wriggling grew weaker as his power waned. For someone with such power, this

dunking must be almost intolerable. Holly blocked her own tube with a thumb, then cleared the second one before twisting it into N^o1's slack mouth. For a moment there was no reaction, and she thought it was too late; then N^o1 jerked, spluttered, and started, like an old engine on a frosty morning.

Alive, thought Holly. We are both alive. If Butler wanted us dead, then we already would be. She braced her feet on the base of the barrel and hugged N^o1 tightly. Calm was needed here.

Calm, she broadcast, though she knew N^o1's empathy would be muted. *Calm, little friend. Artemis will save us.*

If he is alive, she thought but did not broadcast.

* * *

Artemis backed away from the nightmare version of his mother that hovered before him. Jayjay screeched and bucked in his arms, but Artemis held him tightly, automatically scratching the tiny brush of hair on his crown.

"Hand over that creature," demanded Opal. "You have no choice."

Artemis circled Jayjay's neck with his thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, I think I have a choice."

Opal was horrified. "You wouldn't kill an innocent creature."

"I did it before."

Opal studied his eyes. "I don't think you would do it again, Artemis Fowl. My fairy intuition tells me that you are not as coldhearted as you pretend to be."

It was true. Artemis knew he couldn't harm Jayjay, even to derail Opal's plans. Still, no reason to tell Opal that.

"My heart is cold, pixie. Believe it. Use some of that magical empathy to search my soul."

His tone gave Opal pause. There was steel there, and he was hard to read. Perhaps she should not gamble so recklessly with him.

"Very well, human. Hand over the creature and I will spare your friends."

"I have no friends," Artemis shot back, though he knew it was a transparent bluff. Opal had been here for a few days at least. She had doubtless hijacked the manor's surveillance and security.

Opal/Angeline scratched her chin. "Hmm, no friends. Apart from the LEP elf who accompanied you to the past, and of course the demon warlock who sent you back. Not to mention your big burly bodyguard."

Alliteration, thought Artemis. She's toying with me.

"Then again," mused Opal/Angeline, "Butler is not really your friend anymore. He's mine."

This was a worrying statement, and perhaps true. Artemis, usually an expert interpreter of body language and telltale tics, was flummoxed by this crazed version of his mother.

"Butler would never willingly befriend you!"

Opal shrugged. It was a fair point. "Who said anything about willingly?"

Artemis paled. *Uh-oh.*

"Let me explain what happened," said Opal sweetly. "I scrambled the brains of my little helpers somewhat, so they could not report on me, then had them fly the shuttle back to Haven. Then I hitched

a ride on your time stream before it closed. Oh so simple for someone with my skill set. You didn't even leave a hex at the hole."

Artemis snapped his fingers. "I knew I had forgotten something."

Opal smiled thinly. "Amusing. Anyway, it became obvious to me that I was, or would be, responsible for this entire affair, so I dropped out of the stream a few days early and took my time getting to know your group. Mother, father, Butler."

"Where is my mother?" shouted Artemis, anger punching through his calm exterior like a hammer through ice.

"Why, I'm right here, darling," said Opal in Angeline's voice. "I am really sick, and I need you to go into the past and fetch a magic monkey for me." She laughed mockingly. "Humans are such fools."

"So this is not some kind of shapeshifting spell?"

"No, idiot. I was perfectly aware that Angeline would be examined. Shapeshifting spells are only skin-deep, and even an adept such as myself can only hold one for short periods."

"This means that my mother is not dying?" Artemis knew the answer, but he had to be certain.

Opal ground her teeth, torn between impatience and the desire to explain the brilliance of her plan.

"Not yet. Though soon the damage to her system will be irreversible. I have possessed her from a distance. An extreme form of the *mesmer*. With power like mine, I can manipulate her very organs. Imitating Spelltropy was child's play. And once I have little Jayjay I can open my own hole in time."

"So you are nearby? Your real self?"

Opal had enough of questions. "Yes, no. What does it matter? I win, you lose. Accept it, or everyone dies."

Artemis edged toward the door. "This game is not over yet."

Footsteps outside and a strange rhythmic squeaking. A wheelbarrow, Artemis guessed, though he did not have much experience with gardening aids.

"Oh, I think this game is over now," said Opal slyly.

The heavy door bounced in fits as it was butted from the outside. Butler pushed the trolley into the room, stumbling after it, hunched and shivering.

"He is strong, this one," said Opal, almost in admiration. "I *mesmerized* him, but still he refused to kill your friends. The stupid man's heart almost burst. It was all I could do to force him to construct the barrel and fill it with fat."

"To smother fairy magic," Artemis guessed.

"Obviously, idiot. Now the game is absolutely over. Finished. Butler is my ace in the hole, as you humans might say. I hold all the aces. You are alone. Give me the lemur and I will go back to my own time. Nobody has to suffer."

If Opal gets the lemur, then the entire planet will suffer, thought Artemis.

Opal snapped her fingers. "Butler, seize the animal."

Butler took a single step toward Artemis, then stopped. Shudders racked his broad back, and his fingers were claws wringing an invisible neck.

"I said get the animal, you stupid human."

The bodyguard dropped to his knees and pounded the floor, trying to drive the voice from his head.

“Get the lemur now!” shrieked Opal.

Butler had enough strength for three words. “Go . . . to ...hell.”

Then he clutched at his arm and collapsed.

“Oops,” said Opal. “Heart attack. I broke him.”

Stay focused, Artemis ordered himself. Opal may hold all the aces, but perhaps there is a hole in one of those aces.

Artemis tickled Jayjay under the chin. “Hide, little friend. Hide.”

And with that he tossed the lemur toward a chandelier suspended from the ceiling. Jayjay flailed in the air, then latched on to a glass strut. He pulled himself nimbly into the hanging light and hid behind sheets of dangling crystal.

Opal immediately lost interest in Artemis, concentrating on levitating Angeline’s body to the level of the chandelier. With a squeal of frustration she realized that such remote elevation was beyond even a being of her power.

“Doctor Schalke!” she called, and somewhere her real mouth was calling it too. “Into the bedroom, Schalke!”

Artemis filed this information, then ducked below Opal to his mother’s bedside. A mobile JumpStart defibrillator cart was parked among the row of medical equipment ranged around the four-poster, and Artemis quickly switched it on, dragging the entire contraption to the limit of its cord, to where Butler had collapsed.

The bodyguard lay faceup, hands thrown back as though there were an invisible boulder on his chest. His face was stretched with the effort of moving the great stone. Eyes closed, sweat sheened, teeth clenched.

Artemis unbuttoned Butler’s shirt, exposing a barrel chest hard with muscle, scars, and tension. A cursory examination told him that there was no heartbeat. Butler’s body was dead; only his brain was left alive.

“Hold on, old friend,” murmured Artemis, trying to keep his mind focused.

He pulled the defibrillator paddles from their holsters and peeled back their disposable safety covers, leaving a thin coating of conductive gel on the contact surfaces. The paddles seemed to grow heavier as he waited for the unit to charge, and by the time the GO light flashed green, they felt like rocks in his hands.

“Clear!” he called to no one in particular, then positioned the paddles firmly on Butler’s chest and hit the shock button under his thumb, sending three hundred and sixty volts of electricity into his bodyguard’s heart. Butler’s body arched, and the sharp smell of burning hair and skin assailed Artemis’s nostrils. Gel crisped and sparked, burning twin rings where the pads had made contact. Butler’s eyes flew open and his massive hands gripped Artemis’s shoulders.

Is he still Opal’s slave?

“Artemis,” breathed Butler, but then frowned in confusion. “Artemis? How?”

“Later, old friend,” said the Irish boy brusquely, mentally progressing to the next problem. “Just rest for now.”

This was not an order he would have to repeat. Butler sank immediately into exhausted unconsciousness. But his heart beat strongly inside his chest. He had not been dead long enough to have suffered brain damage.

Artemis’s next problem was Opal, or more specifically, how to get her out of his mother’s body.

If she did not vacate soon, Artemis had no doubt that his mother would not recover from the ordeal.

Gathering his nerve with several deep breaths, Artemis switched his full attention to his mother's hovering body. She was twirling below the chandelier as though suspended from it, clawing at Jayjay, who appeared to be taunting her by waving his hindquarters in her direction.

Can this situation get any more surreal?

Just then Dr. Schalke entered the room brandishing a pistol, which seemed too large for his delicate hands.

"I am here, you creature. Though I must say, I don't like your tone. I may be spellbound, but I am not an animal."

"Do shut up, Schalke. I can see I will have to fry a few more of your brain cells. Now, please, fetch that lemur!"

Schalke pointed four fingers of his free hand toward the chandelier. "The lemur is at a considerable height, yes?"

How do you suggest I fetch him? Perhaps I could shoot him dead?"

Opal swooshed low, arms and legs twirling like a harpie. "No!" she shrieked, striking him around the head and shoulders. "I would shoot a hundred of you, a thousand, before I let you harm one hair of that creature's fur. He is the future. My future! The world's future!"

"Indeed," said the doctor. "Were I not *mesmerized*, I suspect I should be yawning."

"Shoot the humans," commanded Opal. "The boy first; he is the most dangerous."

"Are you certain? The man mountain looks more dangerous to me."

"Shoot the boy!" howled Opal, frustration sending tears streaming down her cheeks. "Then Butler and then yourself."

Artemis swallowed. This was cutting things a bit fine; his accomplice had better get a move on.

"Very well," said Schalke, fiddling with the safety on Butler's Sig Sauer. "Anything to escape these theatrics."

I have seconds before he figures out that catch, thought Artemis. Seconds to distract Opal. Nothing to do but to reveal the hole in her ace.

"Come now, Opal," Artemis said with a calmness he did not feel. "You wouldn't shoot a ten-year-old boy, would you?"

"I absolutely would," said Opal without a heartbeat's hesitation. "I am considering cloning you so that I can kill you over and over again. Heaven."

Then *all* of what Artemis had said registered.

"Ten? Did you say you were ten years old?"

Artemis forgot all about the danger surrounding him, lost in the sweet moment of triumph. It was intoxicating.

"Yes, that is what I said. I am ten. My *real* mother would have noticed immediately."

Opal chewed the knuckles of Angeline's left hand, thinking.

"You are the Artemis Fowl from *my* time? They brought you back!"

"Obviously."

Opal reared backward through the air, as though taken by the wind.

"There is another one. Here somewhere, another Artemis Fowl."

“Finally!” said Artemis, smirking. “The great pixie genius sees the truth.”

“Find him,” shrieked Opal. “Find him immediately. At once.”

Schalke straightened his glasses. “At once *and* immediately. This must be important.”

Opal watched him go with real hatred in her eyes. “When this is over, I am going to destroy this entire estate just for spite. And then, when I return to the past, I shall—”

“Don’t tell me,” interrupted ten-year-old Artemis Fowl. “You will destroy it again.”

Almost Eight Years Ago

When fourteen-year-old Artemis had a moment to consider things, sometime in between scaling pylons and outwitting murderous Extinctionists, he realized that there were a lot of unanswered questions about his mother’s illness. *He* had supposedly given her Spelltrophy, but who had passed it to him? Holly’s magic had permeated his body in the past, but she herself was hale and hearty. Why wasn’t she sick? Or for that matter, how had Butler escaped infection? He had been healed so many times that he must be half-fairy by now.

And of *all* the thousands of humans healed, *mesmerized* or wiped every year, *his* mother was the one to fall ill. The mother of the only human on Earth who could do something about it. Very coincidental. Too coincidental by far.

So, either someone had deliberately infected his mother, or the symptoms were being magically duplicated. Either way, the result was the same: Artemis would travel back in time to find the antidote. The lemur, Jayjay.

And who would want Jayjay found as much as Artemis did? The answer to that question lay in the past. Opal Koboï, of course. The little primate was the last ingredient in her magical cocktail. With his brain fluid in her bloodstream, she would be literally the most powerful person on the planet. And if Opal couldn’t nab Jayjay in her own time, she would get him in the future. Whatever it took. She must have followed them back through the time stream, jumped out early, and organized this whole affair. Presumably once she had Jayjay’s brain fluid, navigating her way back would not be a problem.

It was confusing even for Artemis. Opal wouldn’t even be in his present if he hadn’t gone back in time. And *he* had only gone back in time because of a situation she had created. It had been Artemis’s own attempts to cure his mother that had led Opal to infect her.

But one thing he now felt sure of was that Opal was behind this. She was behind them and in front of them. Chasing their group into her own clutches. A time paradox.

There are two Opals in this equation, thought Artemis. I think there should continue to be two Artemis Fowls.

And so a plan began to take shape in his mind.

Once the young Artemis had been apprised of all the details and convinced of their accuracy, he had at once agreed to accompany them to the future, in spite of Butler’s vocal objection.

“It’s my mother, Butler,” he said simply. “I must save her. Now I charge you to stay by her side until I return. Anyway, how could they hope to succeed without me?”

“How indeed,” Holly Short had wondered, then taken more pleasure than was necessary in watching that arrogance drain from the boy’s features when the time stream opened in front of them, like the maw of some great computer-generated serpent.

“Chin up, Mud Boy,” she’d said as Artemis the younger watched his arm dissolve. “And watch

out for quantum zombies.”

The time stream had been difficult for Artemis the elder. Any other human would have been torn apart by such repeated exposure to its particular radiation, but Artemis held himself together by sheer willpower. He focused on the high end of his intellect, solving unprovable theorems with large cardinals and composing an ending for Schubert’s unfinished Symphony No 8.

As he worked, Artemis sensed the odd derisive comment from his younger self.

More B minor? Do you really think so?

Had he always been this obnoxious? How tiresome. Little wonder people in general did not like him.

The Present

Back in his own time, in his own house, Artemis the elder paused only to grab some clothes from the wardrobe before quickly exiting his study, warning Foaly and N^o1 to keep silent with a simple *shhh*. He moved quickly along the corridor toward the dumbwaiter shaft adjacent to the second-floor tea room. This was not the most direct route to the security center, in fact the route was circuitous and awkward, but it was the only possible way to pass through the house undetected.

Butler believed he had every square inch of the manor, apart from the Fowl’s private chambers, under surveillance, but Artemis had long since worked how to travel through the house without being picked up on camera. This route involved hiding in corners, walking on furniture, traveling in dumbwaiters, and tilting a full-length mirror to just the right angle.

It was possible, of course, that a hostile could figure out the same pathways, coordinates and trajectories, and therefore move about the house undetected. Possible, but highly improbable, and not without an intimate knowledge of nooks and crannies that did not exist on any plans.

Artemis followed a zigzag pattern down the hallway, a second behind a security camera’s sweep, then ducked quickly inside the dumbwaiter shaft. Luckily the box was on this floor, or he would have been forced to shinny down the cable, and shinnying was not one of his strong suits. Artemis reached outside and pressed the ground-floor button, whipping his hand back in before the descending box caught his wrist. While it was true that security would register the dumbwaiter descending, it would not set off any red lights.

Once at kitchen level, Artemis rolled onto the floor and opened the fridge door to shield his movement into the pantry. Deep shadows concealed him until the camera swung away from the doorway, allowing him to climb on top of the table and jump outside.

All the time, thinking. Plotting.

Assume the worst. Little Artemis is helpless, and Holly and N^o1 are already incapacitated. Quite possible if someone like Butler was mesmerized and doing the incapacitating. Opal is somewhere near the command center, manipulating my mother. It was Opal who could see the magic inside me. Not Mother. She peeled away the spell I had cast over my parents.

And: Of course B minor. If one starts in B minor, one finishes in B minor. Any fool knows that.

A suit of medieval armor stood in the main lobby. The same armor that Butler had put on to do battle with a troll during the Fowl Manor siege five years earlier. Artemis approached it slowly, his back flat against an abstract gray/black tapestry, which camouflaged him almost perfectly. Once concealed behind the suit of armor, he nudged the base of an adjacent mirror until it reflected a

spotlight's beam directly into the lens of the lobby camera.

Now his path to the security center was clear. Artemis strode purposefully toward the booth. This was where Opal would be, he was certain of it. From there she could monitor the entire house, and it was directly below Angeline's bedroom. If Opal was indeed controlling his mother, closer was better.

It was clear from several yards away that he was right. Artemis could hear Opal ranting from a distance.

"There is another one. Here somewhere, another Artemis Fowl."

Either the penny had dropped, or young Artemis had been forced to reveal their plan. "Find him," shrieked Opal. "Find him immediately. At once."

Artemis stepped quietly into the security control booth. A box room off the main lobby that had served in its time as a cloakroom, weapons lockup, and holding cell for prisoners. Now it housed a computer desk similar to those found in editing suites, and stacks of monitors displaying live feeds of the manor and grounds.

Huddled before the monitor bank was Opal, dressed in Holly's LEP gear. She had wasted no time in stealing the fairy suit. It was mere minutes since Artemis had locked it in the safe.

The little pixie was multitasking furiously, scanning the monitors while maintaining remote control over Artemis's mother. Her dark hair was sweat slicked, and her childlike limbs shook with effort.

Artemis sneaked into the room and quickly punched the code into the weapons locker.

"When this is over, I am going to destroy this entire estate just for spite. And then, when I return to the past, I shall ..."

Opal froze. Something had made a clicking noise. She turned to find Artemis Fowl pointing a weapon of some kind at her. She immediately abandoned all other spells, throwing her efforts into a desperate *mesmer*.

"Drop that gun," she intoned. "You are my slave."

Artemis felt instantly woozy, but he had already pressed the trigger, and a dart loaded with a Butler special concoction of muscle relaxants and sedatives buried its inch-long needle in Opal's neck, where there was no protection from the suit. This was a shot in a million, since Artemis was not proficient with firearms. As Butler put it: *Artemis, a genius you may be, but leave the shooting to me, because you couldn't hit the backside of a stationary elephant.*

Opal concentrated furiously on the puncture wound, dousing it with magical sparks, but it was too late. The drug was already entering her brain, loosening her control on the magic inside her.

She began to sway and flicker, alternating between her real pixie self and Miss Book.

Miss Book, thought Artemis. My suspicions were correct. The only stranger in the equation.

Intermittently Opal disappeared altogether, shield buzzing in and out. Magical bolts shot from her fingers, frying the monitors before Artemis could get a look at what was going on upstairs.

"Now I can do the bolts," she slurred. "I've been trying to focus enough magic all week."

The magic shifted and swirled, finally etching a picture in the air. It was a rough picture of Foaly, and he was laughing.

"I hate you, centaur!" screamed Opal, lunging toward, and then through, the insubstantial image. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed, snoring, on the floor.

Artemis straightened his tie.

Freud, he felt certain, would have a field day with that.

Artemis hurried upstairs to his parents' room. The rug was coated in a pool of lumpy fat. Two sets of fairy footprints led from the turgid pearlescent puddle into the en suite bathroom. Artemis heard the power shower drilling against the tiles.

Opal used animal fat to suppress N°1's magic. How despicable. How horrible.

Young Artemis was studying the spreading mass of goo. "Look," he said, noticing his older self. "Opal used animal fat to suppress N°1's magic. How ingenious."

Under the noise of the shower were the sounds of retching and complaining. Butler was hosing down Holly and N°1, and they were not happy or healthy.

But alive. Both alive.

Angeline lay on her bed, wrapped in a goose down duvet. She was pale and dazed, but was it Artemis's imagination or had just a tinge of color crept back into her cheeks? She coughed gently, and immediately both Artemises were at her side.

Artemis the elder raised an eyebrow at his younger self. "You can see how this might be awkward," he said pointedly.

"I can indeed," conceded the ten-year-old. "Why don't I have a poke around in your . . . in my study. See what I come up with."

This is a problem, Artemis realized. My own inquisitiveness. Perhaps I should not have promised not to mind-wipe my younger self. Something will have to be done.

Angeline opened her eyes. They were blue and calm, peering out from tired, dark sockets.

"Artemis," she said, her voice the rasp of fingers on tree bark. "I dreamed I was flying. And there was a monkey ..."

Artemis shook with relief. She was safe; he had saved her.

"It was a lemur, Mother. Mom."

Angeline smiled wanly, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "*Mom*. I have waited so long to hear you say that. So long."

And with that smile on her face, Angeline lay back and drifted off into deep, natural sleep.

Just as well, Artemis realized. Or she may have noticed the fairies in the bathroom, or the contents of a fat barrel on the rug. Or a second Artemis lurking shiftily by the bookcase.

Butler emerged from the bathroom dripping wet, shirtless, paddle marks scorched into his skin. He was paler than usual, and had to lean against the door frame for support.

"Welcome back," he said to Artemis the elder. "This little one is quite a chip off the old block. Gave me one hell of a jump start."

"He *is* the old block," said Artemis wryly.

Butler jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Those two didn't enjoy their dip in the barrel."

"Animal fat is poison to fairies," explained Artemis. "Blocks the magical flow. Turns their own power rancid."

A shadow settled on Butler's brow. "Opal made me do it. She . . . Miss Book approached me at the main gates as I was leaving for the airport. I was trapped in my own skull."

Artemis laid a gentle hand on his bodyguard's forearm. "I know. No apologies are necessary."

Butler remembered that he did not have his weapon, and he remembered who did have it. "What

did you do with Schalke? Knockout dart?"

"No. Our paths did not cross."

Butler staggered to the bedroom door, Artemis hot on his heels. "Opal is controlling him, though he's making her work for it. We need to secure them both right now."

It took them several minutes to reach the security booth, with Butler pulling himself along the walls, and by that time Opal was already gone. Artemis ran to the window just in time to see the blocky rear end of a vintage Mercedes take the bend in the driveway. A small figure bounced on the backseat. Two bounces, the first time it was Opal, the second Miss Imogen Book.

Already her power returns, realized Artemis.

Butler loomed above him, panting. "This isn't over yet."

Artemis did not respond to the comment. Butler was simply stating the patently obvious.

Then the engine noise increased in volume and pitch.

"Gear change," said Butler. "She's coming back."

Artemis felt a chill pass over his heart, though he had been expecting it.

Of course she's coming back, he thought. She will never have another chance like this one. Butler can barely walk. Holly and N^o1 will be diminished for hours, and I am a mere human. If she retreats now, Jayjay will be free of her forever. Soon Foaly's squad will arrive from Tara and whisk the little lemur underground. For perhaps five minutes, Opal has the upper hand.

Artemis planned quickly. "I need to take Jayjay away from here. So long as he is in the manor, everyone is in danger. Opal will kill us all to cover her tracks."

Butler nodded, sweat running in rivulets through the lines on his face. "Yes. We can make it to the Cessna."

"I can make it to the Cessna, old friend," corrected Artemis. "I am charging you with the protection of my mother and friends, not to mention keeping my younger self off the Internet. He is as dangerous as Opal."

It was a sensible tactic, and Butler knew it was coming before Artemis said it. He was in such bad shape that he would slow Artemis down. Not only that but the manor would be wide open for any of Opal's thralls to stroll in and exact her revenge.

"Very well. Don't take her over seven thousand feet, and watch the flaps: they're a bit sticky."

Artemis nodded as if he didn't know. Giving instructions comforted Butler.

"Seven thousand. Flaps. Got it."

"Would you like a gun? I have a neat Beretta."

Artemis shook his head. "No guns. My aim is so bad that even with Holly's eye to help me, I would probably only succeed in shooting off a toe or two. No, all I need is the bait." He paused. "And my sunglasses."

MURDER MOST FOWL

The Fowl family currently had three aircrafts. A Lear jet and Sikorsky helicopter, which were hangared at the nearby airport, and a small Cessna that lived in a small garage workshop beside the high meadow on the northern border of the estate. The Cessna was several years old and would have been recycled some time ago, had Artemis not taken it on as a project. His aim was to make it carbon neutral *and* cost effective, a goal that his father heartily approved of.

“I have forty scientists working on the same problem, but my money is on you,” he had confided to his son.

And so Artemis coated the entire body of the craft with lightweight superefficient solar panels, like NASA’s prototype flying wing—the Helios. Unlike the Helios, Artemis’s Cessna could still fly at its normal speeds *and* take passengers. This was because Artemis had removed the single engine and installed smaller ones to turn the main propeller, the four extra props on the wings, and the landing gear. Most of the metal in the skeleton had been stripped out and replaced with a lightweight polymer. Where the fuel tank had been now sat a small battery.

There were still a few adjustments to make, but Artemis believed his ship was skyworthy. He hoped so. There was a lot riding on the soundness of the little craft. He sprinted from the kitchen door, across the courtyard, and toward the high meadow. With any luck Opal would not realize he was gone until she saw the plane taking off. Of course, *then* he wanted her to see him. Hopefully he could draw her away long enough for LEP reinforcements to arrive.

Artemis felt the tiredness in his legs before he had gone a hundred yards. He had never been the athletic type, and the recent time-stream jaunts had done nothing for his physique, even though he had concentrated hard on his muscles during the trips, willing himself to tone up. A little mind-over-matter experiment that sadly had not yielded any results.

The old farm gate to the meadow was closed, so Artemis scaled it rather than struggle with the heavy bolt. He could feel the heat from the simian’s body high inside his jacket, and its little hands were tight on his neck.

Jayjay must be safe, he thought. He must be saved.

The garage doors were sturdier than they looked, and were protected with a keypad entry system. Artemis tapped in the code and threw open the doors wide, flooding the interior with the deep orange rays of the early evening sun. Inside, nestled in a horseshoe of benches and tool trolleys, was the modified Cessna, hooked up to a supplementary power cable. Artemis snapped the cable from its socket on the fuselage and clambered into the cockpit. He strapped himself into the pilot’s seat,

remembering briefly when he had first flown this plane solo.

Nine years old. I needed a booster seat.

The engines started immediately and virtually silently. The only noise came from the whirring of the propellers and the clicks of switches as Artemis ran through his preflight check.

The news was generally good. Eighty percent power. That gave the small plane a range of several hundred miles. Easy enough to lead Opal on a merry dance along the Irish coast. But the flaps were sticky and the seals were old.

Don't take her over seven thousand feet.

“We’re going to be fine,” he said to the passenger inside his jacket. “Absolutely fine.”

Was this the truth? He could not be certain.

The high meadow was wide and long, and sloped gently upward to the estate wall. Artemis nudged the Cessna from her hangar, swinging the nose in a tight turn to give himself maximum runway. Under ideal circumstances the five-hundred-yard grass runway was more than ample for a takeoff. But there was a tailwind, and the grass was a few inches longer than it should have been.

Despite these considerations we should be okay. I have flown in worse conditions than this.

The takeoff was textbook. Artemis pulled back on the nosewheel at the three-hundred-yard mark and comfortably cleared the north wall. Even at this low altitude he could see the Irish sea to the west, black with scimitars of sunlight slicing across the wave tips.

He was tempted, for the merest fraction of a moment, just to flee, but he didn’t.

Have I changed utterly? Artemis asked himself. He realized that he was running out of palatable crimes. Not so long ago, nearly all crime had been acceptable to him.

No, he decided. There were still people who deserved to be stolen from, or exposed, or dropped in the deep jungle with only flip-flops and a spoon. He would just have to put more effort into finding them.

Artemis activated the wing cameras. There was one such person on the avenue below. A megalomaniacal, cold-hearted pixie. Opal Koboi. Artemis could see her striding toward the manor, jamming Holly’s helmet down over her ears.

I was afraid of that. She thought to take the helmet. A most valuable tool.

Still, he had no alternative but to attract her attention. The lives of his family and friends were at stake. Artemis took the Cessna down a hundred feet, following Opal’s path to the manor. She may not hear the engine, but the sensors in Holly’s helmet would throw up a dozen red lights.

On cue, Opal stopped in her tracks, throwing her gaze skyward and capturing the small plane in her sights.

Come on, Opal, thought Artemis. Take the bait. Run a thermal.

Opal strode purposefully toward the manor until she snagged the toe of one LEP boot under the heel of another.

Stupid tall elf, she thought furiously, righting herself. When I am queen . . . No . . . when I am empress, all tall fairies will have their legs modified. Or better still, I will have a human pituitary gland grafted to my brain so that I shall be the tall one. A giant among fairies, physically and mentally.

She had other plans too: An Opalesque cosmetic face mold that could give any of her adoring fans the Koboi look in seconds. A homeopathic hoverchair covered in massage bars and mood sensors

that would read her humor and spray whatever scents were needed to cheer her up.

But those plans could wait until she was empress. For now the lemur was her priority. Without its brain fluid, it could take years to accomplish her plans. Plus, magic was so much easier than science.

Opal slotted Holly's helmet onto her head. Pads inside the helmet automatically inflated to cradle her skull. There was some coded security, which she contemptuously hacked with a series of blinks and hand movements. These LEP helmets were not half as advanced as the models in her R&D department.

Once the helmet's functions were open to her, the visor's display crystals fizzled and turned scarlet. Red alert! Something was closing in. A 3-D radar sweep revealed a small craft overhead, and recognition software quickly pegged it as a human-built Cessna.

She quickly selected the command sequence for a thermal scan, and the helmet infrared detector analyzed the electromagnetic radiation coming from inside the aircraft. There was some waffle from the solar panels, but the scan isolated an orange blob in the pilot's seat. One passenger only. The helmet's biometric reader conveniently identified the pilot as Artemis Fowl, and dropped a 3-D icon over his fuzzy figure.

"One passenger," murmured Opal. "Are you trying to decoy me away from the house, Artemis Fowl? Is that why you fly so low?"

But Artemis Fowl knew technology; he would anticipate thermal imaging.

"What do you have up your sleeve?" wondered the pixie. "Or perhaps up your shirt."

She magnified Artemis's heart and discovered a second heat source superimposed over the first, distinguishable only by a slightly cooler shade of red.

Even at that desperate moment, Opal could not help but admire this young human, who had attempted to mask the lemur's heat signature with his own.

"Clever. But not ingenious."

And he would need to be ingenious to defeat Opal Koboi. Bringing back the second Artemis had been a neat trick, but she should have caught it.

I was defeated by my own arrogance, she realized. That will not happen again.

The helmet automatically tuned into the Cessna's radio frequency, and so Opal sent Artemis a little message.

"I am coming for the lemur, boy," she said, a pulse of magic setting the suit's wings aflutter. "And this time there will be no *you* to save *you*."

Artemis could not feel or see the various waves that probed the Cessna, but he guessed that Opal would use the helmet's thermal imager to see how many hot bodies were on the plane. Perhaps she would try X-ray too. It would seem as though he was trying to hide Jayjay's heat signature with his own, but that was a transparent ploy and should not fool Opal for more than a heartbeat. When the pixie was satisfied that her prize was escaping, then how could she not follow?

Artemis banked starboard to keep Opal in the camera eye, and was satisfied to see a set of wings sliding from the slots in Holly's suit.

The chase is on.

Time for the bait to pretend it is trying to escape.

Artemis peeled away from the estate, heading for the deep purple sea, opening the throttle wide, satisfied by the plane's smooth acceleration. The batteries were channeling a steady supply of power

to the engines without releasing one gram of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

He checked the tail camera view and was not totally surprised to find the flying pixie in his monitor.

Her control over the magic is addled by the sedative, he guessed. Opal may have had barely enough power to jump-start the suit. But soon the dart's aftereffects will peter out and then there may be lightning bolts flaring across my wing.

Artemis turned south, following the jagged coast. The clamor and bustle of Dublin's high-rise apartment blocks, belching chimneys, and swarm of buzzing helicopters gave way to long stretches of gray rock shadowed by the north-south rail track. The sea pushed against the shore, folding its million fingers over sand, scrub, and shale.

Fishing boats chugged from buoy to buoy, trailing white sea-serpent wakes, sailors snagging lobster pots with long-handled gaffs. Fat clouds hung ponderously at twelve thousand feet, rain brewing in their bellies.

A peaceful evening, so long as no one looks up.

Though at this altitude, Opal's blurred flying form could be mistaken for an eagle.

Artemis's plan went smoothly for longer than he had hoped. He made sixty miles without interference from Opal. He allowed himself a glimmer of hope.

Soon, he thought. The LEP reinforcements will come soon.

Then his radio crackled into life. "Artemis? Are you there, Artemis?"

Butler. He sounded extremely calm, which he always did before he explained just how serious a situation was.

"Butler, old friend. I'm here. Tell me the good news."

The bodyguard sighed into his microphone, a breaking wave of static.

"They're not coming after the Cessna. You are not the priority."

"N^o1 is," said Artemis. "They need to get him below-ground. I understand."

"Yes. Him and . . ."

"Say no more, old friend," said Artemis sharply. "Opal is listening."

"The LEP are here, Artemis. I want you to turn around and fly back."

"No," said Artemis firmly. "I will not put Mother at risk again."

Artemis heard a strange creaking sound and surmised that Butler was strangling the microphone stalk.

"Very well. Another location, then. Someplace where we can dig ourselves in."

"Very well, I am on a southerly heading anyway, so why not—"

Artemis didn't complete his veiled suggestion, as his channel was blocked by a deafening burst of white noise. The squawk left a droning aftershock in his ears, and for a moment he allowed the Cessna to drift.

No sooner had he regained control than a thudding blow to the fuselage caused him to lose it again.

Several red lights flashed on the solar panel display-plane icon. At least ten panels had been shattered by the impact.

Artemis spared half a second to check the rear camera. Opal was no longer trailing behind him.

No surprise there.

The pixie's voice burst through the radio speakers, sharp with petulance and evil intent.

"I am strong now, Mud Boy," she said. "Your poison is gone, flushed from my system. My power grows, and I am hungry for more."

Artemis did not engage in conversation. All his skill and quick thinking would be needed to pilot the Cessna.

Opal struck again on the port wing, smashing her forearms into the solar panels and breaking them as a child would break sheets of ice in a pool, windmilling her arms gleefully, wings buzzing to keep pace. The plane bucked and yawed, and Artemis fought the stick to pull the craft level.

She's insane, thought Artemis. Utterly insane.

And then: Those panels are unique. And she calls herself a scientist.

Opal scampered along the wing, punching an armored fist into the fuselage itself. More panels were obliterated, and tiny fist-size dents buckled the polymer over Artemis's shoulder. Tiny cracks ran along the dents, slit by the wind.

Opal's voice was loud in the speaker. "Land, Fowl. Land and I may not return to the manor when I have finished with you. Land! Land!"

Each order to *land* was emphasized by another blow on the cockpit. The windshield exploded inward, showering Artemis with jagged chunks of Plexiglas.

"Land! Land!"

You have the product, Artemis reminded himself. So you have the power. Opal cannot afford to kill Jayjay.

The wind screamed in Artemis's face, and the readings from his flight instruments made no sense, unless Opal was scrambling them with the LEP suit's field. But Artemis still had a chance. There was fight left in this Fowl.

He pointed the nose downward, banking sharply left. Opal kept pace easily, tearing strips from the fuselage. She was a destructive shadow in the dimming dusk light.

Artemis could smell the sea.

I am too low. Too soon.

More red lights on the instrument panel. The power supply had been cut. The batteries were breached. The altimeter whirred and beeped.

Opal was at the side window. Artemis could see her tiny teeth grinning at him. She was saying something. Shouting. But the radio was not operational anymore. Just as well, probably.

She is having the time of her life, he realized. Fun, fun, fun.

Artemis struggled with the controls. The sticky flaps were the least of his worries now. If Opal decided to snip a few cables, then he would lose whatever say he had over the plane. Though it was too early, Artemis lowered the tricycle landing gear. If Opal sabotaged the mechanism now, the wheels should stay down.

They plummeted earthward, locked together. A sparrow on an eagle's back. Opal smashed her armored head through the door window's Plexiglas, still shouting inside the helmet, spittle spraying the visor. Issuing orders that Artemis could not hear and could not spare enough time to lip-read. He could see that her eyes glowed red with magic, and it was clear from her manic expression that any threads connecting her to rationality had been severed.

More shouting, muffled behind the visor. Artemis cast a sardonic gaze at the radio, which sat dead and dark in its cradle.

Opal caught the look and raised her visor, shouting over the wind, too impatient for the helmet PA.

“Give me the lemur and I will save you,” she said, her voice *mesmerizing*. “You have my . . .”

Artemis avoided her gaze and pulled the emergency flare gun from under the seat, sticking it in her face.

“You leave me no choice but to shoot you,” he said, voice cold and certain. This was not a threat, it was a statement of fact.

Opal knew the truth when she heard it, and for one second her resolve wavered. She pulled back, but not quickly enough to prevent Artemis from firing the flare into her helmet, then reaching up to flick down the visor.

Opal spun away from the Cessna, trailing black smoke, red sparks swarming around her head like angry wasps. Her wing smashed into the Cessna’s, and neither survived intact. Solar cell splinters flashed like stardust, and Opal’s tail feathers helicoptered slowly earthward. The airplane yawed to starboard, moaning like a wounded animal.

I need to land. Now.

Artemis didn’t feel guilty about what he’d done. Flare burns would not hinder a being of Opal’s regenerative power for long. Already the magic would be repairing her skin damage. At best he had bought himself a few minutes’ reprieve.

When Opal comes back, she will be beyond furious. A true maniac. Perhaps her judgment will be clouded.

Artemis smiled grimly, and for a moment he felt like his old conniving self, before Holly and his mother had introduced him to their pesky moral codes.

Good. Clouded judgment may give me the advantage I need.

Artemis leveled the craft as much as he could, slowing his descent. Wind slapped his face, tugging his skin. Shielding his eyes with a forearm, Artemis peered downward through the blur of propeller spin.

Hook Head peninsula jutted into the blackness of the sea below him like a slate-gray arrowhead. A cluster of lights winked on the eastern curve. This was the village of Duncade, where Butler had awaited his young charge’s return from Limbo. A magical inlet that had once sheltered the demon isle of Hybras. The entire area was a magical hotspot and would set LEP spectrometers buzzing.

Dark blue night was falling quickly, and it was difficult to tell hard ground from soft. Artemis knew that a carpet of meadow ran from Duncade to the Hook Head lighthouse, but he could only see the grass strip once every five seconds when it flashed emerald in the tower’s beam.

My runway, thought Artemis.

He dragged the Cessna into the best possible approach line, descending in uneven, stomach-lurching swoops. Solar panels frittered away from the nose and wings, streaming behind the craft.

Still no sign of Opal.

She’s coming. Make no mistake about it.

With each flash of green, the hard earth rushed up to meet him.

Too fast, thought Artemis. I am coming in too fast. I will never get my legal pilot’s license flying like this.

He clenched his jaws and held the stick tightly. Touchdown was going to be rough.

And it was, though not bone-shatteringly so. Not the first time. It was on the second bounce that Artemis was shunted forward into the console and heard the left side of his collarbone snap. A horrible sound that brought bile to his throat.

No pain yet. Just cold. I am going into shock.

The Cessna's wheels skidded on the long grass, which was coated with sea spray and slicker than ice. Artemis scowled, not because of his injuries but because his fate was in the hands of chance now; he had no control. Opal would be coming for Jayjay, and he must do his utmost to distract her.

The outside world continued to intrude most violently on Artemis's thoughts. The front wheel strut glanced off a sharp rock, shearing away completely. For several seconds the wheel continued to roll alongside the plane, until it veered off into the darkness.

Another bump and the Cessna collapsed onto its nose, propeller plowing furrows in the earth. Sheaves of grass fanned the air, and clods of muck rained through the holes in the windshield.

Artemis tasted earth and thought, I don't see what Mulch makes all the fuss about. It's not exactly lobster mousse.

Then he was out of the plane and stumbling toward the rocky shoreline. Artemis did not call for help, and none would have come if he had. The rocks were black, treacherous, and deserted. The sea was loud and the wind blew high. Even if the lighthouse beam had pinned the falling plane's image to the sky, it would be a long while before unarmed, unsuspecting villagers arrived to offer assistance. And by then it would be too late.

Artemis stumbled on, his left arm hanging low, his good hand cupped over the furry head poking from the front of his jacket.

"Almost there," he panted.

A pair of sea stacks jutted from the water like the last teeth from the gums of a tobacco chewer. Hundred-foot-high hard-rock columns that had resisted the erosive power of wind and wave. The locals called them The Nuns because of their sisterly appearance. Head-to-toe habits.

The Nuns were quite the local attraction, and sturdy rope bridges spanned the chasms from shore to Little Sister and on to Mother Superior. Butler once told Artemis that he had spent many lonely nights on the second sea stack with night-vision binoculars, glassing the ocean for a sign of Hybras.

Artemis stepped onto the first span of the bridge. It rippled and creaked slightly under his feet, but held firm. He saw the sea far below through the slats, flat rocks pushing through the surface like mushrooms through clay. The body of an unlucky dog lay splayed on one of the lower rocks, a stark reminder of what could happen if you lost your footing on The Nuns.

I am hurrying toward a dead end, he told himself. Once I reach the second stack, there is nowhere to go but down.

But there was no choice. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that Opal was coming. He did not even need his shield-filtered sunglasses to see her. The pixie had no magic to spare for invisibility. She lurched zombielike across the meadow, a red haze of magic lighting her face inside the helmet, fists clenched at her side. Her wings were outstretched but tattered and battered. She would not be flying anywhere on those. Only the power of Jayjay could save Opal now. He was her last hope for victory: if she did not inject his brain fluid soon, then surely the LEP would arrive to protect the endangered lemur.

Artemis walked across the bridge, careful not to bash his dangling arm against the railing.

Miraculously he was in little constant pain, but every footstep sent a throb of white-hot agony flashing across his upper chest.

Distract her a while longer. Then the cavalry will surely arrive. The winged, invisible cavalry. They wouldn't abandon me, would they?

“Fowl!” the shriek came from behind him. Closer than he expected. “Give me the monkey!” The voice was layered with wasted magic. No eye contact. No *mesmer*.

Monkey, thought Artemis, smirking. Ha-ha.

Farther across the chasm. Blackness above and below, starpoints in the sky and sea. Waves growling like tigers. Hungry.

Artemis stumbled toward the first Nun, Little Sister. Stepping out onto a rock plateau worn treacherous. His foot slipped on the surface, and Artemis spun across the diameter of the summit like a ballroom dancer with an unseen partner.

He heard Opal's shriek. For Jayjay to die now would be disaster, as she would be stuck in this time with the entire LEP on her trail and no ultimate powers.

Artemis did not look back, though he ached to. He could hear Opal clanking across the boards, swearing with each breath. The words sounded almost comical in her childlike pixie voice.

Nowhere to go but forward. Artemis almost fell onto the second span of bridge, pulling himself along the rope rail until he arrived at Mother Superior. Locals said that if you stood at the right point on the coastline at sunrise, and squinted a little, then you could just make out stern features on the Mother Superior's face.

The rock felt stern now. Bleak and unforgiving. Even one false step would not be tolerated.

Artemis dropped to his knees on the mushroom curve of the plateau, cupping his left elbow in his right palm.

Soon, shock and pain will overcome me. Not yet, genius. Focus.

Artemis glanced down to the V of his jacket. The furry head was gone.

Dropped on the Little Sister. Waiting for Opal.

This was confirmed by a sudden shriek of delight from behind. Artemis turned slowly—and with great effort to face his enemy. It seemed as though he had been fighting her forever.

The pixie stood atop the sea stack, almost dancing with delight. Artemis could see a small furry figure splayed on the plateau.

“I have him,” Opal cackled. “With all your genius! With your big bursting brain! You dropped him! You simply dropped him!”

Artemis felt a throb build in his shoulder. In a minute, there would be worse coming, he was certain of it.

Opal stretched two hands toward her prize. “He is mine,” she said reverentially, and Artemis swore he heard thunder in the distance. “The ultimate magic is mine. I have the lemur.”

Artemis spoke clearly, so his words would carry across the divide. “It's not a lemur,” he said. “It's a monkey.”

Opal's smile froze, all tiny teeth, and she grabbed what she had thought was Jayjay. The figure was soft in her hands.

“A toy!” she gasped. “This is a toy.”

Artemis's triumph was dulled by pain and exhaustion. “Opal, meet Professor Primate. My

brother's plaything."

"A toy," repeated Opal dully. "But there were two heat sources. I saw them."

"Microwave gel pack stuffed inside the foam," explained Artemis. "It's over, Opal. Jayjay is in Haven by now. You can't get him. Turn yourself in, and I won't have to hurt you."

Opal's features were twisted with rage. "Hurt me! Hurt *me!*" She dashed the toy monkey against the rock surface over and over again until the dented works fell out.

A metallic voice issued from the speaker: "History will remember this day. . . . History will . . . History will remember this day."

Opal screamed, and red sparks boiled around her fingertips.

"I cannot fly and I cannot shoot lightning, but I have enough magic to boil your brain."

Opal's dreams of supreme power were forgotten. At that moment all she wanted was to kill Artemis Fowl. She stepped onto the second span with murder in her heart.

Artemis stood wearily and reached into his pocket. "Your armor should save you," he said, his voice calm. "It will be terrifying, but the LEP will dig you out."

Opal scoffed. "More tactics. Bluff and double bluff. Not this time, Artemis."

"Don't make me do this, Opal," Artemis pleaded. "Just sit down and wait for the LEP. No one needs to get hurt."

"Oh, I think someone needs to get hurt," said Opal.

Artemis took his modified laser pointer from his pocket, activating the narrow beam and aiming it at the base of the Little Sister.

"What are you going to do with that thing? It would take a hundred years to saw through this rock."

"I'm not trying to saw through it," said Artemis, keeping the beam steady. "And it's not a rock."

Opal raised her hands, sparks laced like barbed wire around her fingers.

No more talk.

Artemis's laser beam cut deep into the base of the Little Sister, until it pierced the outer shell and reached the vast pocket of methane beneath.

The Little Sister was not a rock. It was the seventh kraken, attracted by the magical resonance of Hybras. Artemis had been studying it for years. Not even Foaly knew it was there.

The explosion was huge, shooting a column of fire fifty feet into the air. The outer shell collapsed under Opal, engulfing her in a blizzard of shrapnel.

Artemis heard the dull twang of her LEP armor flexing to take the shock.

Foaly's armor should save her.

He threw himself flat on the sea stack, suffering the rain of rock, weed, and even fish on his back and legs.

Luck will save me now. Only luck.

And luck did save him. The plateau was hammered with several sizeable missiles, but none struck Artemis. He was hailed with smaller objects and would have a hundred bruises and cuts to add to his list of injuries, but not a single bone was broken.

When the world felt as though it had stopped vibrating, Artemis crawled to the lip of the sea stack and gazed down at the bubbling sea below. A pyramid of rubble steamed gently in the waves

where the kraken had been. The great beast would be moving away silently now, to find another magical hotspot. Of Opal there was no sign.

The LEP will find her.

Artemis turned over on his back and watched the stars. He did this often, and the sight usually caused him to wonder how he would reach the planets orbiting those pinpricks of light, and what he would find there. On this evening the stars just made him feel tiny and insignificant. Nature was vast and mighty and would eventually swallow him, even the memory of him. He lay there cold and alone on the plateau, waiting for a feeling of triumph that he realized would never arrive, and listening to the distant shouts of the villagers as they made their way across the long meadow.

Holly arrived before the villagers, gliding in from the north and touching down soundlessly on the sea stack.

“You’re flying,” said Artemis, as though he had never seen this before.

“I borrowed a suit from N^o1’s bodyguards. Well, I say borrowed . . .”

“How did you find me?” asked Artemis, though he could guess.

“Oh, I saw a huge explosion and wondered, Now who could that be?”

“Hmm,” said Artemis. “A bit of a giveaway.”

“Also, I followed my old suit’s radiation trail. I’m still following it.” Holly touched a finger to her visor, and the filter changed. “That’s quite a pile of rocks you dumped on Opal. It’s going to take a Retrieval team some time to dig her out. She’s cursing like a tunnel dwarf down there. What did you do to her?”

“The seventh kraken,” explained Artemis. “The one Foaly missed because it was tubular rather than conical, I would guess. I picked it up on a weather satellite.”

Holly placed a finger on Artemis’s forehead. “Typical Artemis Fowl. Beaten to a pulp and still he delivers a lecture.”

Magical sparks flowed from Holly’s fingertip, engulfing Artemis like a cocoon. He felt comforted and peaceful, like a baby in its blanket. His pains were wiped away, and his shattered collarbone liquefied, then solidified whole.

“Nice trick,” he said, smiling. His eyes were glassy.

“I’m here till Tuesday,” said Holly, smiling back. “N^o1 filled my tank.”

Artemis gazed up at his friend through a red haze. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Holly. Truly. You’ve done so much.”

Holly’s eyes were distant. “Maybe you made the wrong decision; maybe I would have made that decision myself. We’re from different worlds, Artemis. We will always have doubts about each other. Let’s just carry on and leave the past in the past, where it should be.”

Artemis nodded. That was as good as he was going to get, and better than he deserved.

Holly pulled a tether from her belt and looped it under Artemis’s arms. “Now, let’s get you home before the villagers start building a gallows.”

“Good idea,” mumbled Artemis, drowsy with the aftereffects of his magical makeover.

“Yes, believe it or not, other people do have those occasionally.”

“Occasionally,” agreed Artemis; then his head lolled back and he was asleep.

Holly reset her wings for the added weight and launched them both off the lip of the sea stack,

flying low to avoid the flashlight beams of the locals, which strobed the night sky like searchlights.

Foaly tuned into Holly's helmet frequency while she was airborne.

"The seventh kraken, I'm guessing. Of course, I had my suspicions." He paused. "This would be a good opportunity to mind-wipe Artemis," he said. "Save ourselves a lot of grief in the future."

"Foaly!" said Holly, horrified. "We don't wipe our friends. Artemis brought Jayjay back to us. Who knows how many cures lie in that lemur's brain."

"I'm kidding. I'm kidding. And guess what, we won't even have to ask Jayjay to donate some brain fluid. N°1 synthesized it while he was waiting for the shuttle. That kid is one of a kind."

"I seem to run into a lot of those. By the way, we need to send a team in for Opal."

"They're en route. I think you're in for another rake over the coals from IA when you get back here."

Holly snorted. "What's new?"

Foaly fell silent, waiting for Holly to share the details of her adventures. Eventually he could wait no more.

"Okay, you win. I'll ask. What happened back then— almost eight years ago? My gods, it must have been mayhem."

Holly felt a phantom tingle on her lips where she had kissed Artemis.

"Nothing. Nothing happened. We went, we got the lemur, we came back. A couple of glitches, but obviously nothing we couldn't handle."

Foaly didn't press for details. Holly would tell him when she had processed it herself.

"Do you ever think you might like to go to work and then just come home? No drama?"

Holly watched the ocean flash by below her and felt the weight of Artemis Fowl in her arms.

"No," she said. "I never think that."

A TEAM OF HAIRDRESSERS

Less than an hour later they landed at Fowl Manor. Artemis woke up just as Holly's heels hit the gravel, and was instantly alert.

"Magic is wonderful stuff," he said, pinwheeling his left arm.

"You should have held on to yours," quipped Holly.

"Ironically, if I had not attempted to cure Mother, Opal would have allowed her to recover. It was my journey into the past that gave Opal the basis for her plan, which she instigated by following us to her future."

"I liked you better asleep," said Holly, retrieving her tether. "My head hurt less." "It's the big time paradox. If I had done nothing, then nothing would have needed to be done." Holly touched her helmet. "Let me get Foaly on the com. You two could both talk at the same time."

The exterior lights cast a soft glow on the gravel, setting the stones shimmering like gems. Lofty evergreen trees swayed in the gentle breeze, rustling with life. Like Tolkien's creatures.

Artemis watched Holly stride toward the main doors.

If only, he thought. If only.

N^o1 sat on the front step, flanked by a squad of LEP officers bristling with the latest weaponry. Artemis knew that his DNA was coded into their guns, and all they had to do was select his icon from a list and there would be no escape. Jayjay had wrapped himself around the demon's crown like a hunting cap and seemed most comfortable there. He roused himself when he saw Artemis and leaped into the boy's arms. A dozen LEP rifles instantly beeped, and Artemis guessed that his icon was being selected.

"Hello there, little fellow. How do you like the present?"

N^o1 answered for the lemur. "He likes it fine. Especially now that no one will be sticking any needles in his head."

Artemis nodded. "You duplicated the fluid. I thought that might be an option. Where is Dr. Schalke?"

"He collapsed once Opal departed. Butler put him in a guest room."

"And Artemis Junior?"

"Technically, you are Artemis Junior," replied N^o1. "But I know what you are trying to ask me. Your younger self has been transported back to his own time. I sent a Retrieval captain and stayed

here as a marker. I thought you would want him out of the way as soon as possible, what with your father and the twins on their way home.”

Artemis tickled Jayjay under the chin. “It might have proved awkward.”

Holly was troubled. “I know we promised not to wipe him, but I’m not particularly thrilled that there’s a little Fowl running around with fairy knowledge in his devious skull.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Devious skull? Charming.”

“Hey, if the flap fits . . .”

N^o1 was a little pale. With a flex of his tail, he lifted his squat rump from the step. “About this no mind-wiping promise. The thing is, nobody told me.”

Holly stared at him. “So you wiped him?”

N^o1 nodded. “And Schalke. I also left a residual spell in young Artemis’s eyeballs so Butler will get it too. Nothing fancy, just a blanket memory loss. Their brains will fill in the gaps, invent believable memories.”

Holly shuddered. “You left a spell in his eyeballs? That is revolting.”

“Revolting but ingenious,” said Artemis.

Holly was surprised. “You don’t seem too indignant. I was expecting a speech. Rolling eyes, flapping arms, the whole Fowl thing.”

Artemis shrugged. “I knew it would happen. I didn’t remember anything, so I must have been wiped, therefore we must have won.”

“You always knew.”

“I didn’t know what the cost would be.”

N^o1 sighed. “So I’m off the hook, as you humans say?”

“Absolutely,” said Holly, clapping him on the shoulder. “I feel a lot better now.”

“On the positive side, I bolstered your atomic structure. Your atoms were a bit rattled by the time stream. I’m amazed you are still in one piece. I can only imagine how hard you were forced to concentrate.”

“Well, you *had* bolstered my atoms, and I have to beg one more favor,” said Artemis. “I need you to send a note back in time.”

“I’ve been ordered not to open the time stream again, but maybe we can squeeze back one more thing,” said N^o1.

Artemis nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“When and where?”

“Holly knows. You can do it from Tara.”

“How do you spell *stupendous*?” said Holly, smiling.

Artemis stepped back and craned his neck to peer upward at the front window of his parents’ room. Jayjay mimicked the action, climbing onto Artemis’s shoulders and tilting his tiny head back.

“I’m afraid to go up, for some reason.”

He noticed himself wringing his fingers, and stuffed both hands in his jacket pockets.

“What she must have been through, all because of my meddling. What she must have . . .”

“Don’t forget us,” interjected N^o1. “We were submerged in animal fat. You have no idea how gross that is. Eyeball spells are the epitome of good taste compared to animal fat.”

“I was turned into an adolescent,” said Holly, winking at Artemis. “Now, *that* was gross.”

Artemis’s smile was forced. “Strangely, all this guilt-tripping is not making me feel any better. The DNA cannons aren’t helping either.”

Holly gestured at the LEP squad to stand down, then tilted her head slightly as a message came through.

“There’s a chopper coming in. Your father. We’ve got to fly.”

N^o1 wagged a finger. “And that’s not just a figure of speech. We actually have to fly. I know humans use that expression even when they don’t intend to actually fly, so just to avoid confusion . . .”

“I get it, N^o1,” said Artemis softly.

Holly raised her forearm, and Jayjay jumped onto it. “He will be safer with us.”

“I know.”

He turned to Holly, meeting her gaze. Blue and hazel eyes.

She gazed back for a second, then activated her wings, rising a foot from the surface.

“In another time,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek.

He was at the front door before Holly called to him.

“You know something, Fowl? You did a good thing here. For its own sake. Not one penny of profit.”

Artemis grimaced. “I know. I’m appalled.”

He looked down at his feet, composing a pithy remark, but when he looked up again, the avenue was empty.

“Good-bye, my friends,” he said. “Take care of Jayjay.”

Artemis could hear helicopter rotors in the distance by the time he reached his mother’s bedroom. He would have some explaining to do, but he had a feeling that Artemis Senior would not press him for details once he saw Angeline in good health.

Artemis flexed his fingers, summoning his courage, then pushed through into the bedchamber. The bed was empty; his mother was sitting at her dresser, despairing at the state of her hair.

“Oh dear, Arty,” she said in mock horror on spotting her son in the mirror. “Look at me. I need a team of hairdressers flown in immediately from London.”

“You look fine, Mother . . . Mom. Wonderful.”

Angeline ran a pearl-handled brush through her long hair, the luster returning with each stroke. “Considering what I have been through.”

“Yes. You were ill. But you are better now.”

Angeline turned on her dresser stool, reaching out her arms. “Come here, my hero. Hug your mother.”

Artemis was happy to do as he was told.

A thought struck him. *Hero*. Why had she called him a hero?

Generally victims of the *mesmer* remembered nothing of their ordeal. But Butler had remembered what Opal did to him, he had even described the experience to Artemis. Schalke had been wiped. But what of Mother?

Angeline held him tightly. “You have done so much, Arty. Risked everything.”

The rotors were loud now, rattling the windows. His father was home.

“I didn’t do so much, Mom. What any son would do.”

Angeline’s hand cradled his head. He could feel her tears on his cheek. “I know everything, Arty. Everything. That creature left me her memories. I tried to fight her, but she was too strong.”

“What creature, Mother? It was the fever. You had a hallucination, that’s all.”

Angeline held him at arms’ length. “I was in the diseased hell of that pixie’s brain, Artemis. Don’t you dare lie to me and say that I wasn’t. I saw your friends almost die to help you. I saw Butler’s heart stop. I saw you save us all. Look me in the eye and tell me these things did not happen.”

Artemis found it difficult to meet his mother’s stare, and when he did it was impossible to lie.

“They happened. All of them. And more.”

Angeline frowned. “You have a hazel eye. Why did I not notice that?”

“I put a spell on you,” said Artemis miserably.

“And on your father?”

“Him too.”

Below, the front door crashed open. His father’s footsteps raced across the lobby, then onto the stairway.

“You saved me, Artemis,” said his mother hurriedly. “But I have a feeling that all your spell-casting in some way put us in this situation. So I want to know everything. Everything. Do you understand?”

Artemis nodded. He couldn’t see how to escape this. He was in a dead end, and the only way out was complete honesty.

“Now we will give your father and the twins time to hug me and kiss me, then you and I are going to have a talk. It will be our secret. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Artemis sat on the bed. He felt six years old again, when he had been caught hacking the school computers to make the test questions a little more challenging.

His father was on the landing now. Artemis knew that his secret life ended today. As soon as his mother got him alone, he would be explaining himself. Starting at the beginning. Abductions, uprisings, time jaunts, goblin revolutions. Everything.

Complete honesty, he thought.

Artemis Fowl shuddered.

Some hours later, the master bedroom had been transformed by the whirlwind known as Beckett Fowl. There were pizza boxes on the night table and tomato-sauce finger paintings on the wall. Beckett had stripped off his own clothes and dressed himself in one of his father’s T-shirts, which he had belted around his waist. He had applied a mascara mustache and lipstick scars to his face and was currently fencing with an invisible enemy, using one of his father’s old prosthetic legs as a sword.

Artemis was finishing his explanation of Angeline’s miraculous recovery. “And so I realized that Mother had somehow contracted Glover’s Fever, which is usually confined to Madagascar, so I synthesized the natural cure preferred by the locals and administered it. Relief was immediate.”

Beckett noticed that Artemis had stopped talking, and heaved a dramatic sigh of relief. He rode an imaginary horse across the room and poked Myles with the prosthetic leg.

“Good story?” he asked his twin.

Myles climbed down from the bed and placed his mouth beside Beckett’s ear.

“Artemis simple-toon,” he confided.

EPILOGUE

Hook Head

Commander Trouble Kelp himself led the Retrieval team to dig Opal Koboï out of the rubble. They inflated a distortion bubble over the work zone, so they could fire up the shuttle's lasers without fear of discovery.

"Hurry up, Furty," Trouble called over an open channel. "We have one hour until sunrise. Let's get that megalomaniacal pixie out of there and back into her own time."

They were lucky to have a dwarf on the team. Normally dwarfs were extremely reluctant to work with the authorities, but this one had agreed so long as he didn't have to work any of the hundred-and-ninety-odd dwarf holy days, and if the LEP paid his exorbitant consultant fees.

In a situation like this one, dwarfs were invaluable. They could work rubble like no other species. If you needed to dig something out alive, then dwarfs were the ones to do it. All they needed to do was let their beard hairs play over a surface, and they could tell you more about what was going on under that surface than any amount of seismic or geological equipment.

Currently, Trouble was monitoring Furty Pullchain's progress through the kraken debris on the feed from his helmet cam. The dwarf's limbs were a shade paler than usual in the night-vision filter. One hand directed a nozzle of support foam that coated the tunnel wall at stress points, and the other reached in under his beard to rehinge his jaw.

"Okay, *Commander*," he said, managing to make the rank sound like an insult. "I made it to the spot. It's a miracle I'm alive. This thing is as steady as a house of cards in a hurricane."

"Yeah, whatever, Furty. You're a marvel. Now, pull her out and let's get belowground. I have a captain I need to discipline."

"Keep yer acorns on, Commander. I'm readin' the beacon loud and clear."

Trouble fumed silently. Maybe Holly Short was not the only one who would have to be disciplined.

He followed the live feed, watching Furty scoop aside the rock, weed, and shell fragments covering Holly's suit.

Except there was no suit. Just a helmet with its flashing tracer beacon.

"I come all this way for a helmet?" said Furty, aggrieved. "Ain't no pixie here, just the smell of one."

Trouble sat up straight. "Are you sure? Could you be in the wrong spot?"

Furty snorted. "Yep. I'm at the *other* buried LEP helmet. 'Course I'm sure."

She was gone. Opal had disappeared.

“Impossible. How could she escape?”

“Beats me,” said Furty. “Maybe she squeezed through a natural tunnel. Them pixies are slippery little creatures. I remember one time when I was a sprog. Me and Kherb, my cousin, broke into a—”

Trouble cut him off. This was serious. Opal Koboi was loose in the world. He put a video call in to Foaly at Police Plaza.

“Don’t tell me,” said the centaur, running a hand down his long face.

“She’s gone. She left the helmet so the beacon would draw us in. Any vitals from her suit?”

Foaly checked his monitor. “Nothing. It was loud and clear until five minutes ago. I thought it was a suit malfunction.”

Trouble took a breath. “Put out an alert. Priority one. I want the guards tripled on *our* Koboi in Atlantis. It would be just like Opal to bust herself out.”

Foaly got to it. One Opal Koboi had almost managed to take over the world. Two would probably shoot for the entire galaxy.

“And call Holly,” continued Commander Kelp. “Inform the captain that her weekend leave is canceled.”

Fowl Manor, Almost Eight Years Ago

Artemis Fowl awoke in his own bed, and for a moment red sparks danced before his eyes. They sparkled and twinkled hypnotically before chasing their own tails out of existence.

Red sparks, he thought. Unusual. I have seen stars before, but never sparks.

The ten-year-old boy stretched, grabbing handfuls of his own duvet. For some reason he felt more content than usual.

I feel safe and happy.

Artemis sat bolt upright.

Happy? I feel happy?

He couldn’t remember feeling truly happy since his father had disappeared, but on this morning his mood was bordering on cheerful.

Perhaps it was the deal with the Extinctionists. My first major chunk of profit.

No. That wasn’t it. That particular transaction had left Artemis feeling sick to the pit of his stomach. So much so that he couldn’t think about it and would probably never dwell on the past few days again.

So what could account for this feeling of optimism? Something from the dream he’d been having. A plan. A new scheme that would bring enough profit to fund a hundred Arctic expeditions.

That was it. The dream. What had it been about?

It was just out of reach. The images already fading.

A crafty smile twitched at the corner of his mouth.

Fairies. Something about fairies.

*Here's an excerpt from
Eoin Colfer's thrilling novel*

AIRMAN

available now



CHAPTER 1: THE PRINCESS AND THE PIRATE

Conor Broekhart was a remarkable boy, a fact that became evident very early in his idyllic childhood. Nature is usually grudging with her gifts, dispensing them sparingly, but she favored Conor with all she had to offer. It seemed as though all the talents of his ancestors had been bestowed upon him: intelligence, strong features, and grace.

Conor was fortunate in his situation, too. He was born into an affluent community where the values of equality and justice were actually being applied—on the surface, at least. He grew up with a strong belief in right and wrong that was not muddied by poverty or violence. It was straightforward for the young boy. Right was Great Saltee, wrong was Little Saltee.

It is an easy matter now to pluck some events from Conor's early years and say, *There it is. The boy who became the man. We should have seen it.* But hindsight is an unreliable science, and in truth, there was perhaps a single incident during Conor's early days at the palace that hinted at his potential.

The incident in question occurred when Conor was nine years old and roaming the serving corridors that snaked behind the walls of the castle chapel and main building. His partner on these excursions was the Princess Isabella, one year his senior and always the more adventurous of the two. Isabella and Conor were rarely seen without each other, and often so daubed with mud, blood, and nothing good that the boy was barely distinguishable from the princess.

On this particular summer afternoon, they had exhausted the fun to be had tracking the source of an unused chimney and had decided to launch a surprise pirate attack on the king's apartment.

"You can be Captain Crow," said little Conor, licking some soot from around his mouth. "And I can be the cabin boy that stuck an ax in his head."

Isabella was a pretty thing, with an elfin face and round brown eyes, but at that moment she looked more like a sweep's urchin than a princess.

"No, Conor. You are Captain Crow, and I am the princess hostage."

"There is no princess hostage," declared Conor firmly, worried that Isabella was once again about to mold the legend to suit herself. In previous games, she had included a unicorn and a fairy that were

definitely not part of the original story.

“Of course there is,” said Isabella belligerently. “There is because I say there is, and I am an actual princess, whereas *you* were born in a balloon.” Isabella intended this as an insult, but to Conor being born in a balloon was about the finest place to be born.

“Thank you,” he said, grinning.

“That’s not a good thing,” squealed Isabella. “Dr. John says that your lungs were probably crushed by the alti-tood.”

“My lungs’re better than yours. See!” And Conor hooted at the sky to show just how healthy his lungs were.

“Very well,” said Isabella, impressed. “But I am still the princess hostage. And you should remember that I can have you executed if you displease me.”

Conor was not unduly concerned about Isabella having him executed, as she ordered him hung at least a dozen times a day and it hadn’t happened yet. He was more worried that Isabella was not turning out to be as good a playmate as he had hoped. Basically, he wanted someone who would play the games he fancied playing, which generally involved flying paper gliders or eating insects. But lately Isabella had been veering toward dress-up and kissing, and she would only explore chimneys if Conor agreed to pretend that the two of them were the legendary lovers Diarmuid and Gráinne, escaping from Fionn’s castle.

Needless to say, Conor had no wish to be a legendary lover. Legendary lovers rarely flew anywhere, and hardly ever ate insects. “Very well,” he moaned. “You are the hostage princess.”

“Excellent, Captain,” Isabella said sweetly. “Now, you may drag me to my father’s chamber and demand ransom.”

“Drag?” said Conor hopefully.

“Play drag, not real drag, or I shall have you hung.”

Conor thought, with remarkable wit for a nine-year-old, that if he had actually been hung every time Isabella had ordered it, his neck would be longer than a Serengeti giraffe’s. “Play drag, then. Can I kill anyone we meet?”

“Absolutely anyone. Not Papa, though, until after we see how sad he is.”

Absolutely anyone. That’s something, thought Conor, swishing his wooden sword, thinking how it cut the air like a gull’s wing.

Just like a wing.

The pair proceeded across the barbican, she oohing and he *arring*, drawing fond but also wary looks from those they passed. The palace’s only resident children were well liked, not at all spoiled, and mannerly enough when their parents were nearby; but they were also light fingered and would pilfer whatever they fancied on their daily quests. One afternoon, a particular Italian gold leaf artisan had turned from the cherub he was coating to find his brush and tray of gold wafers missing. The gold turned up later, coating the wings of a week-dead seagull, which *someone* had tried to fly from the Wall battlements.

They crossed the bridge into the main keep, which housed the king’s residence, office, and meeting rooms. And this would generally be where the pair would have been met with a good-natured challenge from the sentry. But the king himself had just leaned out the window and sent the fellow running to catch the Wexford boat and put ten shillings on a horse he fancied in the Curracloe beach races. The palace had a telephone system, but there were no wires to the shore as yet, and the booking

agents on the mainland refused to take bets over the semaphore.

For two minutes only, much to the princess and pirate's delight, the main keep was unguarded. They strode in as though they owned the castle. "Of course, in real life, I *do* own the castle," confided Isabella, never missing a chance to remind Conor of her exalted position.

"Arrrr," said Conor, and meant it.

The spiral staircase ascended through three floors, all packed with cleaning staff, lawyers, scientists, and civil servants; but through a combination of infant cunning and luck, the pair managed to pass the lower floors to reach the king's own entrance, impressive oak double doors with half of the Saltee flag and motto carved into each one. *Vallo Parietis*, read the legend. *Defend the Wall*. The flag was a crest bisected vertically into crimson and gold sections, with a white blocked tower stamped in the center.

The door was slightly ajar. "It's open," said Conor.

"It's open, *hostage princess*," Isabella reminded him.

"Sorry, hostage princess. Let's see what treasure lies inside."

"I'm not supposed to, Conor."

"Pirate Captain Crow," said Conor, slipping through the gap in the door. As usual, Nicholas's apartment was littered with the remains of a dozen experiments. There was a cannibalized dynamo on the hearth rug, copper wiring strands protruding from its belly.

"That's a sea creature and those are its guts," said Conor with relish.

"Oh, you foul pirate," said Isabella.

"Stop your smiling, then, if I'm a foul pirate. Hostages are supposed to weep and wail."

In the fireplace itself were jars of mercury and experimental fuels. Nicholas refused to allow his staff to move them downstairs. Too volatile, he had explained. Anyway, a fire would only go up the chimney.

Conor pointed to the jars. "Bottles of poison. Squeezed from a dragon's bum. One sniff and you vaporate." This sounded very possible, and Isabella wasn't sure whether to believe it or not.

On the chaise longue were buckets of fertilizer, a couple of them gently steaming. "Also from a dragon's bum," intoned Conor wisely. Isabella tried to keep her scream behind her lips, so it shot out of her nose instead.

"It's fert'lizer," said Conor, taking pity on her. "For making plants grow on the island."

Isabella scowled at him. "You're being hanged at sundown. That's a princess's promise."

The apartment was a land of twinklings and shining for a couple of unsupervised children. A stars-and-stripes banner was draped around the shoulders of a stuffed black bear in the corner. A collection of prisms and lenses glinted from a wooden box closed with a cap at one end; and books old and new were piled high like the columns of a ruined temple.

Conor wandered between these columns of knowledge, almost touching everything but holding back, knowing somehow that man's dreams should not be disturbed.

Suddenly, he froze. There was something he should do. The chance might never come again. "I must capture the flag," he breathed. "That's what a pirate captain is supposed to do. Go to the roof so I can capture the flag and gloat."

"Capture the flag and goat?"

"Gloat."

Isabella stood hands on hips. “It’s pronounced gooaaaat, idiot.”

“You’re supposed to be a princess. Insulting your subjects is not very princessy.”

Isabella was unrepentant. “Princesses do what they want; anyway, we don’t have a goat on the roof.”

Conor did not waste his time arguing. There was no winning an argument with someone who could have you executed. He ran to the roof door, swishing his sword at imaginary troops. This door, too, was open. Incredible good fortune. On the hundred previous occasions when Isabella and he had ambushed King Nicholas, every door in the place had been locked, and they had been warned, by stern-faced parents, never to venture onto the roof alone. It was a long way down.

Conor thought about it.

Parents? Flag?

Parents? Flag?

“Some pirate you are,” sniffed Isabella. “Standing around there scratching yourself with a toy sword.”

Flag, then. “Arrr. I go for the flag, hostage princess.” And then in his own voice: “Don’t touch any of the experiments, Isabella. Specially the bottles. Papa says that one day the king is going to blow the lot of us to hell and back with his concoctions, so they must be dangerous.”

Conor went up the stairs fast, before his nerve could fail him. It wasn’t far, perhaps a dozen steps to the open air. He emerged from the confines of the turret stairwell onto the stone rooftop. From dark to light in half a second. The effect was breathtaking: azure sky with clouds close enough to touch. I was born in a place like this, thought Conor.

You are a special child, his mother told him at least once a day. *You were born in the sky, and there will always be a place for you there.* Conor believed that this was true. He had always felt happiest in high places, where others feared to go.

He climbed on top of the parapet, holding tight to the flagpole. The world twirled around him, the orange sun hanging over Kilmore like a beacon. The sea glittered below him, more silver than blue, and the sky called to him as though he actually were a bird. For a moment he was bewitched by the scene, then the corner of the flag crept into his vision. Arrr, he thought. You be the flag. Pride of the Saltees.

The flag stood, perfectly rectangular, crimson and gold with its tower so white it glowed, held rigid by a bamboo frame so that the islands’ emblem would fly proud no matter what the weather. It struck Conor that he was actually standing on top of the very tower depicted by the flag. This might have caused a tug of patriotic pride in an older islander, but to a nine-year-old, all it meant was that his image should be included on the flag. I will draw myself on after I steal the flag, he decided.

Isabella emerged onto the rooftop, blinking against the sudden light. “Come down from the parapet, Conor. We’re playing pirates, not bird boy.”

Conor was aghast. “And leave the flag? Don’t you understand? I will be a famous pirate, more famous than Barbarossa himself.”

“That wall is old, Conor.”

“Pirate Captain Crow, remember.”

“That wall is old, *Conor*. It could fall down. Remember the slates came off the chapel during the storm last year?”

“What about the flag?”

“Forget the flag and forget the goat. I’m hungry, so come down before I have you hanged.”

Conor stamped down off the wall, sulking now. He was about to challenge Isabella, say that she could go ahead and have him hanged for all he cared, *and* she was a rotten hostage. Whoever heard of a hostage *giving* the orders? She should learn to weep and wail properly instead of threatening to execute him a hundred times a day.

He was about to say all of this when there came a dull thump from below that shook the blocks beneath their feet. A cloud of purple smoke oomphed through the doorway, as though someone had cleared a tuba.

Conor had a suspicion bordering on certainty. “Did you touch something?” he asked Isabella.

Isabella was haughty even in the face of disaster. “I am the princess of this palace, so I am quite entitled to touch whatever I wish.”

The tower shook again; this time the smoke was green, and it was accompanied by a foul smell.

“What did you touch, Isabella?”

The princess of the palace turned as green as the smoke. “I may have removed the cap from the wooden box. The one with the pretty lenses.”

“Oh,” said Conor. “That could be trouble.”

King Nicholas had explained the lense box to Conor once, delighted to find that the boy’s passion for learning equaled his own. *The lenses are arranged in a very specific order*, he had said, squatting low so that his own eye appeared monstrous through the first lense. *So when I remove the cap and light comes in one end, it’s concentrated by successive lenses until it can set paper alight at the other. With this little gadget, it might be possible to start a fire from a distance. The ultimate safe fuse.*

Conor remembered thinking at the time that you could leave the box by the window and have it light the fire for you each morning, a chore that he was none too fond of. And now Isabella had removed the cap.

“Did you move the box?”

“Mind your tone, commoner!”

Commoner? Isabella must really be terrified. “Isabella?”

“I possibly placed it on the table, by the window to see the colors passing through.”

Obviously, the device had caught the afternoon light, releasing the power of the lenses into the king’s laboratory, with the fertilizer, jugs of fuel, and various explosive materials. The concentrated light had landed on something combustible.

“We have to go,” said Conor, all thoughts of Captain Crow forgotten. He was no stranger to the power of explosives. His father was in charge of the Wall defense and had brought Conor along on a trip to collapse a smugglers’ cave. It was a birthday treat, but also a lesson to stay away from anything that went boom. The cave wall had collapsed like toy bricks swatted by a toddler.

The tower shook again; several floor blocks rattled in their housings, then dropped into the apartment below. Orange and blue flames surged through the holes, and the snap and grind of breaking glass and twisting metal frightened the two children.

“Up on the wall,” said Conor urgently. “The floor is falling.”

For once, Isabella did not argue. She accepted Conor’s hand and followed him to the lip of the parapet.

“The floor is a foot thick,” he explained, shouting over the roar of the flames. “The parapet is four feet thick. It won’t break.”

The explosions went off below like cannon fire, each one issuing a different odor, a different color smoke. The fumes were noxious, and Conor presumed his own face was as green as Isabella's. It doesn't matter if the parapet holds, he realized. The flames will get us long before then.

To Isabella and Conor it felt as though the entire world shook. The stairwell spewed forth flame and smoke as though a dragon lurked below; and from the courtyard came the screams of islanders as chunks of the tower crashed down from above.

I need to get us out of this place, thought Conor. No one else can save us, not even Father.

There was no way to walk down, not through the inferno below. There was only one way down, and that was to fly.

King Nicholas was down the corridor in the privy when his daughter blew up his apartment. He was admiring the new Doulton wash-out toilet he had recently had plumbed into his own bathroom. Nicholas had considered installing them throughout the palace, but there were rumors of a new flush toilet on the horizon, and it would be a pity to be one step behind progress. *We must embrace progress, be at the forefront of it, or the Saltees will be drowned by a tidal wave of innovation.*

When the first explosion rattled the tower, Nicholas briefly thought that his own personal plumbing could be responsible for the din, but realized that not even the bottle of home-brewed ale he had consumed with Declan Broekhart the previous evening could result in such a disturbance.

They were under attack, then? Unlikely, unless a ship had managed to approach undetected on a clear summer's afternoon.

A thought struck him. Could he have left the cap off the lense box? If so much as a spark took flight in that room . . .

King Nicholas finished his royal business and yanked the door open, quickly closing it again as a roiling cloud of smoke and flame invaded the bathroom, searing his lungs. His apartment was destroyed, no doubt about it. Luckily there was no one in his rooms or above them, so the tower's other occupants should easily escape. *Not the king, though. King Nicholas the Stupid is trapped by his own moldering experiments.*

There was a window, of course. Nicholas was a great believer in the benefits of good ventilation. He was a devotee of meditation, too; but this was hardly the time for it.

The king stuffed a towel under the door to stop a draft inviting the fire in, and flung the window wide. Glass and brickwork tumbled past, and the entire structure shuddered as another explosion shook the tower. Nicholas poked his head out for a sideways peek, just in time to see a plume of multicolored smoke expelled from his lounge. *There go the fuel jars.*

Below, the courtyard was in chaos. The fire division, to their credit, had already hauled the pump wagon to the base of the tower and were cranking up some water pressure. If there was one thing they had plenty of on the Saltees, it was water. On any other day, the salt sea spray would have doused the fire; but today, in spite of a stiff breeze, the sea was as flat as a polished mirror.

One man stood near the base of the tower. He cut a jaunty figure in his French aviator's jacket and feathered cap. At his feet lay a large leather valise, and he seemed quite amused by the entire exploding tower situation.

Nicholas recognized him immediately and called down, "Victor Vigny. You came?"

The man beamed a startlingly white smile from the center of his tanned face. "I came," he shouted in the French accent you would expect from one in such attire. "And a good thing I did, Nick. It seems like you still haven't learned to keep a safe laboratory."

Another explosion. Blue smoke and a shudder that rattled the tower to its foundations. The king ducked out of sight, then reappeared in the window.

“Very well, Victor. Banter over and done. Time to get me down from here. Any of that famous Vigny ingenuity make it across the Atlantic?”

Victor Vigny grunted, then cast an eye around the courtyard. The fire wagon had a ladder hooked on its flank; a rope, too. Neither were long enough to reach the king. “Who designed this thing?” he muttered, hefting the coiled rope onto his shoulder. “Tall towers and short ladders. Just goes to show, there are idiots everywhere.”

“What are you doing?” asked a member of the fire brigade. “Who said you could take that?”

Vigny jerked a thumb skyward. “Him.”

The fireman frowned. “God?”

The Frenchman winced. Idiots everywhere. “Not quite so lofty, *mon ami*.”

The fireman glanced upward, catching sight of the king in the window.

“Do what he says,” roared Nicholas. “That man has saved my life in the past, and I trust him to do it again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am at your . . . at his service.”

Victor pointed at the ladder. “Lean that against the wall, below the window.”

“It won’t reach,” said the fireman, eager to say something intelligent.

“Just do it, *monsieur*. Your king is getting a little hot under the collar.”

The fireman grabbed a comrade, and together they propped the ladder against the tower. Victor Vigny was halfway up before the stiles hit the wall. The tower transmitted its vibrations into the rungs, and Victor knew that it wouldn’t be long before it blew its top, like a plugged cannon. The king’s apartment and everything above it would soon be no more than dust and memories. He quickly reached the top of the ladder, and threading his legs through the rungs, he slid the rope off his shoulder and down his arm.

“Nimble, ain’t he?” commented the fireman to his partner. “But as I intelligently said, that there ladder don’t reach.”

The debris was showering down now, lumps, shards, and entire granite blocks. There was no avoiding it for the three men working at the ladder. They bore the blows with hunched shoulders and grunts.

“Lean it back,” Victor called down, sweat dripping from his face. He tore his feathered cap off as it caught fire, revealing the shock of spiked hair that had earned him the nickname *La Brosse*. “You owe me a hat, Nicholas. I’ve had that one since New Orleans.”

The firemen took the weight of the ladder and the Parisian, pulling him three feet back from the tower wall. Victor Vigny took half a dozen coils in his hand and sent them spinning upward. He had judged the coils accurately, landing the spliced end directly in King Nicholas’s hand.

“Tie her off strong now, and be quick about it.” Victor cinched the rope to the top rung and then slid down the stiles as fast as he could without stripping the skin from his palms.

“Ladder don’t reach,” the fireman pointed out, while Victor plunged his hands into the nearest fire bucket.

“I know that, *monsieur*. But the ladder reaches the rope, and the rope reaches the king.”

“Ah,” said the fireman.

“Now, stand back—if I know your king, that tower has more explosives in it than a similarly sized cannon. I believe we may be about to shoot down the moon.”

The fire brigade gave up. They couldn't pump enough pressure to reach the blaze, and even if they could, that fire was all sorts of colors, and pouring water on it might just make it angry.

So they stood back out of the spitting castle's range, waiting to see if the last male Trudeau in the line could save himself from death by fire or fall.

Inside the bathroom, King Nicholas put his Royal Doulton toilet through its most rigorous test. True, the toilet had been constructed to bear the weight of a hefty adult, but possibly not one swinging from a rope tied to its piping. With a dripping towel draped over his forehead, the king put four loops around the evacuation pipe and a few hitches on the end. *I really hope that pipe does not burst. Being burned alive is bad enough, without being found covered in waste.*

The bathroom's stout wooden door was cracking with heat, as though soldiers battered from without. The steel bands buckled, sending rivets pinging around the room like ricocheting bullets.

Nicholas struggled on, wiping his eyes with the towel, inching toward the dim yellow triangle that must be the window. There was no thinning of the smoke, just a faint glow in its center. Just follow the rope, he told himself. It's not difficult. Move forward and don't let go of the rope.

Nicholas tumbled through the window, remembering to hold on to the rope. He juddered to a halt at the end of its slack, like a condemned man on a gibbet.

“Quit your dassing, Nick!” hollered Victor Vigny. “Get yourself down. One hand after the other. Even a simpleton like this fireman here could manage it.”

“I could indeed!” shouted the fireman, deciding he would worry about the insult later, if at all.

Below the plume of smoke, King Nicholas could breathe again. Each successive gasp of fresh air drove the toxins from his system and returned strength to his limbs.

“Come down, man! I didn't travel from New York City to watch you swing.”

Nicholas grinned, his teeth a flash of white. “I almost died, Victor. Some sympathy would be nice.” These simple sentences were a considerable effort, and each phrase was punctuated by a fit of coughing.

“That's it, now,” said Vigny. “The old Nick. Down you come.”

The king came down slowly, his journey interrupted by several explosions. Once his feet had found purchase on the top rung, Nicholas descended quickly. There were other lives at stake here, after all; and if he got Victor killed because of his own monumental carelessness, the Frenchman would plague him from the afterlife.

Victor had him by the elbows before his boots touched the cobbles, whisking the king away to the relative safety of the keep. They watched from behind an open gorge tower as the king's ladder was seared and blackened.

“What the devil was in there?” asked Victor.

The king's throat whistled with each labored breath. “Some gunpowder. Fireworks. A couple of jars of experimental fuel, Swedish blasting oil. Fuse tape. We have been using the old grain store beneath as a temporary armory. And of course, fertilizer.”

“Fertilizer?”

“Fertilizer is important on the Saltees, Victor. It's the future.” He remembered something. “Isabella. I must show her that I am unharmed. She must see for herself.” He cast his gaze around the

courtyard. "I don't see her. I don't . . . Of course.

Someone has taken her to safety. She is safe, isn't she, Victor?"

Victor Vigny did not meet his friend's gaze; his eyes were directed instead over the king's shoulder at the tower's parapet wall. There were two somethings in the midst of the smoke and flame. Two *someones*. A boy and a girl. Perhaps nine or ten years of age.

"*Mon Dieu,*" breathed the Frenchman. "*Mon Dieu.*"

The turret roof was completely gone, apart from ragged blocks around the walls, as though the dragon had grown and now occupied the entire tower. Through swathes of smoke and flame, Conor could see crumbling masonry and falling beams. A thick column of smoke coughed from the tower, which had effectively become a chimney, drawing air from below to feed the fire. The smoke rose like a giant gnarled tree, black against the summer sky.

Isabella was not in the least hysterical; instead an eerie calm had descended over her, and she stood on the parapet, eyes glazed as though she were half asleep and uncertain of the reality of the situation.

The only way down is to fly, thought Conor. It had long been his dream to fly once more, but these were not the perfect conditions.

He had almost flown on his fifth birthday when the Broekharts had gone on a day trip to Hook Head in Ireland to see the famous lighthouse. Conor's present had been a large kite in the Saltee colors. They had set it loose on the windswept seaside pasture, and a sudden gust had lifted Conor to the tips of his toes and would have dragged him out to sea had his father not grabbed his elbow.

Kite. Saltee colors. The flag.

On the parapet, Conor pounced on the flagpole, pulling at the knots holding the bamboo frame. The knots twisted in his hands, pulled by the wind that flapped the flag in its frame.

"Help me, Isabella," he cried. "We must untie the flag."

"Forget the flag, Captain Crow," said Isabella dully. "Leave the goat, too. I don't like goats. Sneaky little beards."

Conor struggled on with the knots. The ropes were thicker than his slim fingers, but they were brittle from the heat and fell apart quickly. With one momentous wrench, he pulled the flapping flag out of the wind, wrestling it to the parapet. It bucked and cracked under him like a magic carpet, but Conor kept it secure with his own body.

He could barely see Isabella now. She was like a ghost in the smoke. He tried to call her, but smoke went down his throat faster than words could come up. He retched and *arrked* like a seal, flapping his arms at the princess. She ignored him, deciding instead to lie down on the parapet and wait for her father.

Conor fumbled with his belt buckle, pulling the leather strip out from the loops of his trousers. Then he rolled onto his back and passed the belt behind the flag's bamboo diagonals.

This is an insane plan. You are not a pirate on some fantastic adventure.

This wasn't a plan, there was no time for plans. This was a desperate act. In the melee of smoke, explosions, and jets of flame, Conor struggled to his feet, keeping the flag's tip low, hiding it from the wind.

Not yet. Not yet.

He almost stumbled over Isabella. She seemed to be asleep. There was no reaction when his

fingers pulled at her face. *Dead. Is she dead?* The nine-year-old boy felt tears flow over his cheeks, and was ashamed. He needed to be strong for the princess. Be a hero like his papa.

What would Captain Declan Broekhart do? Conor imagined his father's face in front of him.

Try something, Conor. Use that big brain your mother is always talking about. Build your flying machine.

Not a machine, Papa. There is no mechanism. This is a kite.

Flame was climbing the parapet wall, blackening the stone with its fiery licks. Crossbeams, carpets, files, and furniture tumbled into the hungry fire, feeding it. Conor lifted the princess, dragging his friend upright.

"What?" she said grumpily. Then the smoke filled her windpipe, and any words dissolved into a coughing fit.

Conor stood straight, feeling the massive flag flap and crackle in the wind. "It's like a big kite, Isabella," he rasped, words like glass in his throat. "I will hold you around the waist, like this, and then we move to . . ."

Conor never finished his instructions because a further explosion, funneled by the tower, caused a massive updraft, plucking the two children from the parapet and sending the flag spinning into open air like a giant autumn leaf.

The circumstances were unique. Had they jumped, as was Conor's plan, they would have not had enough height for the flag to slow their descent. But the updraft caught their makeshift kite and spun them up another hundred feet, taking them out over the sea. They hung there, in the sky at the plateau of the air tunnel. Weightless. Sky above and sea below.

I am flying, thought Conor Broekhart. I remember this.

Then the flying finished and the falling started, and though it was drastically slowed by the flag, it seemed devilishly swift. Sights dissolved into a kaleidoscope of fractured blues and silvers. The flag caught a low breeze and flipped. Conor watched the clouds swirl above him, stretching to creamy streams. And all the time he held on to Isabella so tightly his fingers ached. He was crying and laughing, and he knew it would be painful when they hit the water.

They crashed into the ocean. It was painful.

When he saw his daughter on the parapet, King Nicholas had tried to scramble up the tower like a dog climbing out of a well. In seconds his nails were torn and bloody.

Victor Vigny had dragged him away from the wall. "Wait, Nick. This is not over yet. Wait. The boy . . . he's . . ."

Nicholas's eyes were wild and anguished. "What? He's what?"

"You have to see it. Come now. We need a boat, in case the wind takes them."

"A boat? A boat? What are you saying?"

"Come, Nick. Come."

Nicholas howled and dropped to his knees as his daughter flew into the air.

Victor watched, amazed. This boy. He was special, whoever he was. Maybe nine, no more than ten. What ingenuity. The explosion took them high; Victor watched their trajectory and then set off for the pier at a run, dragging the king behind him. "The flag could drown them," he puffed. "The frame will collapse, and the flag will wrap around them both."

The king had recovered himself and soon outstripped the others through a trader's gate and down

to the jetty. There were already a half dozen boats on their way to the fallen flag. The first to reach them was a small quay punt, sculled across the wave tops by two muscled fishermen. A line of slower vessels trailed behind them to the pier.

“Alive?” Nicholas roared, but the distance was too great. “Are they alive?”

The flag was pulled from the sea, and wet bundles rolled from it. Victor caught the king and gripped his shoulder tight. The little punt spun in a tight circle, and the fishermen pulled for shore, their oars kicking spume from the water. The news traveled faster than they could, passed from one boat to the next. The words, inaudible at first, became clearer with each fresh call. “Alive. Alive. Both of them.”

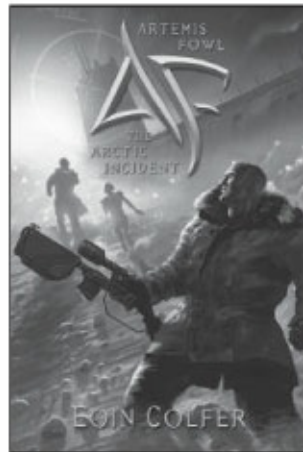
Nicholas sank to his knees and thanked God. Victor smiled first, and then began to clap with delight.

“I came to teach the princess,” he shouted to no one in particular. “But I will teach that boy, too—or perhaps he will teach me.”

START THINKING LIKE A CRIMINAL MASTERMIND



ARTEMIS FOWL



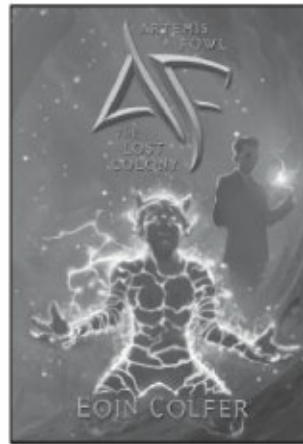
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GREETINGS FOWL FANS,

I hope you enjoyed reading about Artemis and Holly. If you did, you will be happy to know that I am busy planning Artemis's next adventure.

But before Artemis returns, I have decided to embark on a very different project. I am writing the official sixth book in the **Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** series. Most of you have probably already read Douglas Adams's insanely brilliant space series. These are bar none the funniest sci-fi books ever written. The Guides feature Arthur Dent, one of the last humans left alive after the Earth has been destroyed by the remorseless Vogons. Arthur hitches a ride on a spaceship and goes planet-hopping with his friends Ford Prefect, a Betelgeusean journalist; Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed president of the galaxy; and Marvin, the paranoid android.

All this adventuring went on for five books and then Douglas Adams passed away before he could write book six. I am writing the sequel, **And Another Thing...** I hope you will board the spaceship with me so we can travel through Douglas Adams's hilarious galaxy together.



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Artemis thinks he has them right where he wants them . . . but then they stop playing by the rules.

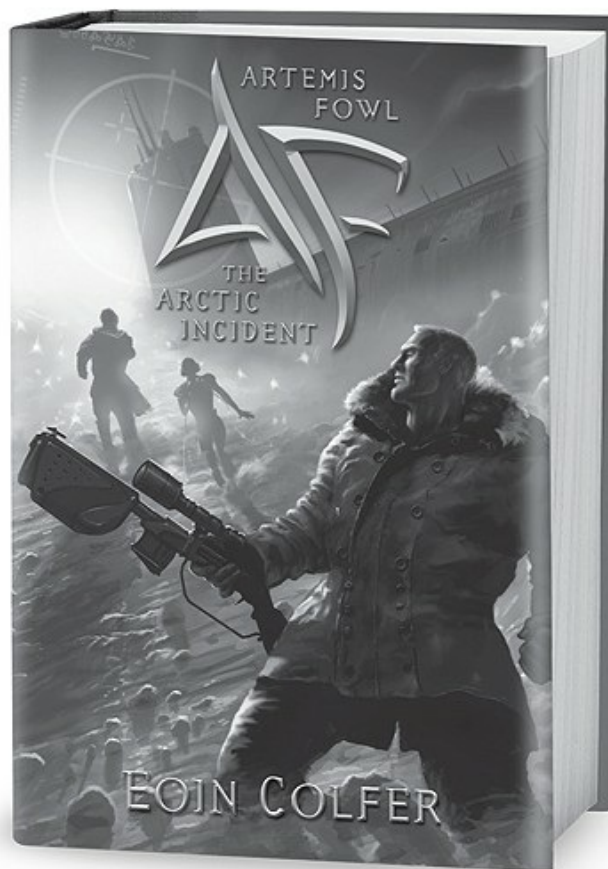
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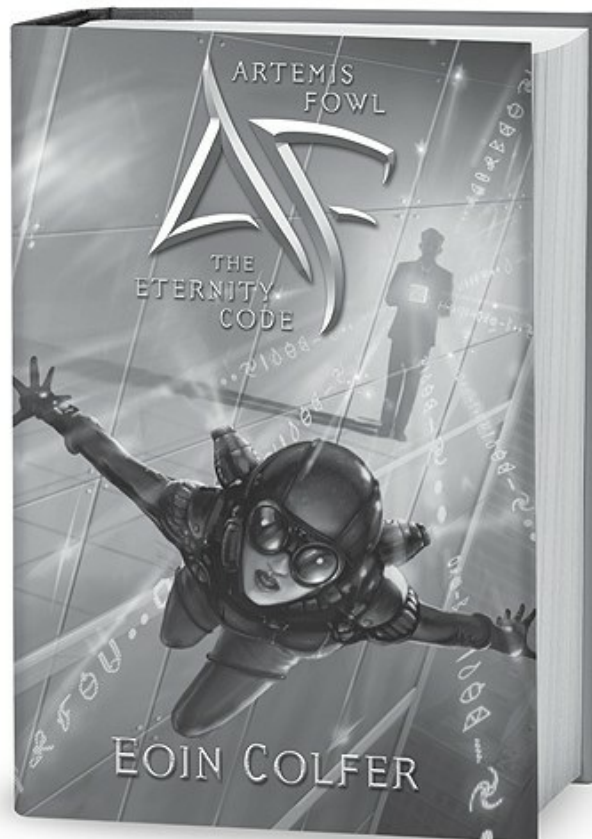
When Artemis Fowl's father is kidnapped by the Russian Mafiya, he must team up with his nemesis, Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon Unit. Instead of battling the fairies, Artemis must join forces with them if he wants to save one of the few people in the world he loves.

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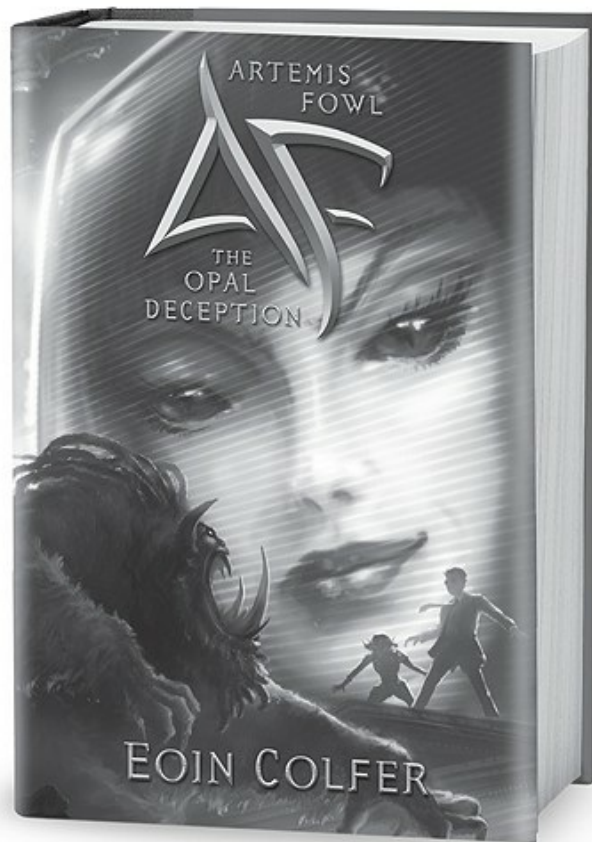
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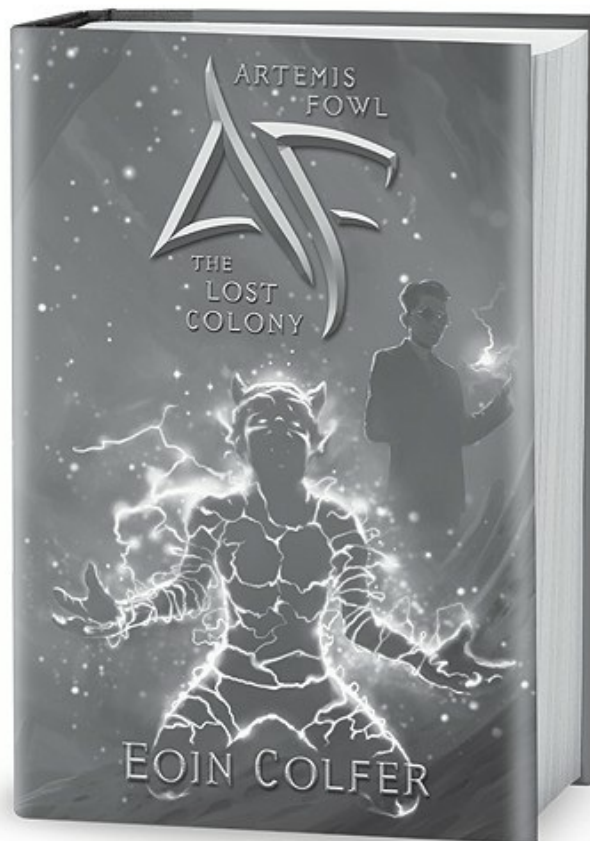
The evil pixie Opal Koboi has spent a year in a self-induced coma, plotting her revenge on all those who foiled her attempt to destroy the LEPrecon fairy police. And Artemis Fowl is at the top of her list. Once again, he must stop the human and fairy worlds from colliding—and this time, Artemis faces an enemy who may finally outsmart him.

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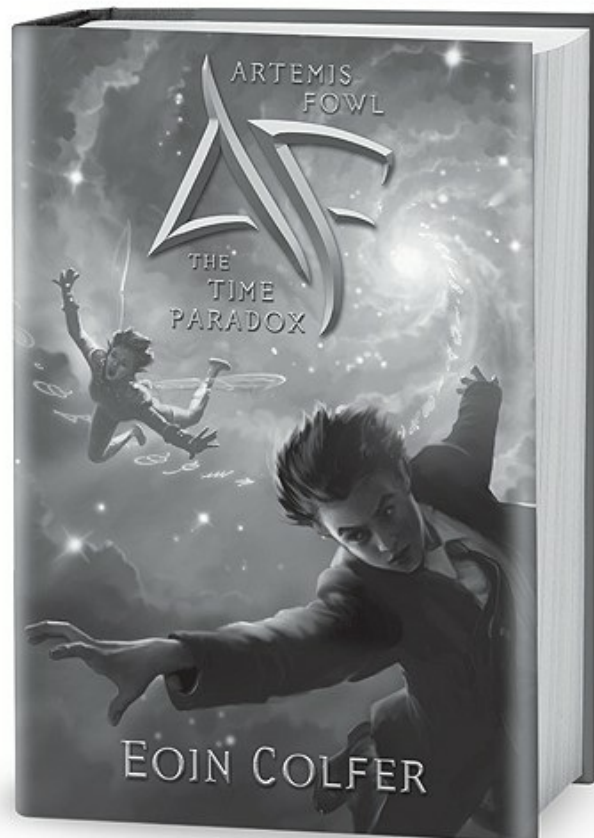
Demons are beginning to materialize without warning on Earth. If humans were to capture one, all fairies would be exposed. In a race against time, a newly reformed Artemis Fowl will have to dip into his bag of tricks to save his fairy friends and stop a power-hungry demon intent on invading Earth's dimension with his savage army.

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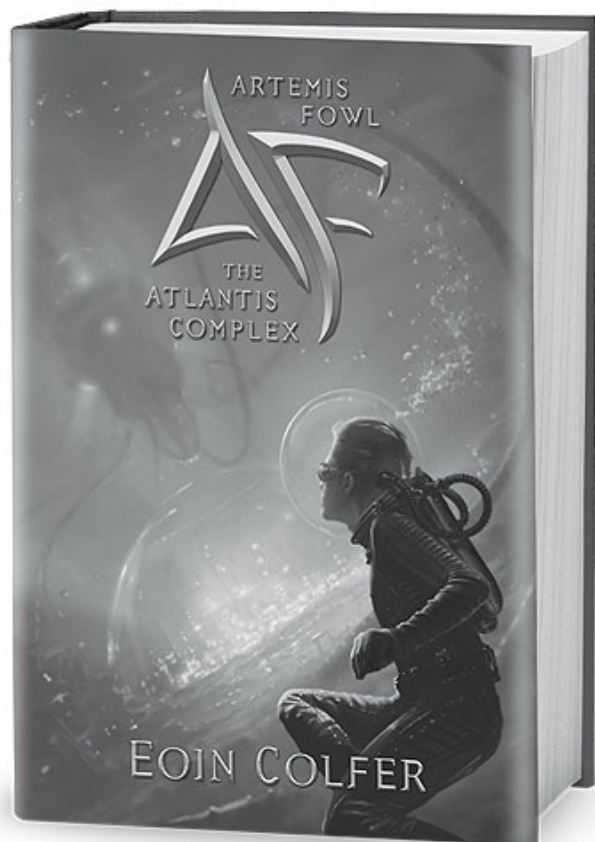
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THE
ATLANTIS
COMPLEX

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THE ATLANTIS
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For Ciarán, who will hear many rugby stories

ARTEMIS FOWL: SO FAR, SO BAD

ARTEMIS was once an Irish boy who longed to know everything there was to know, so he read book after book until his brain swelled with astronomy, calculus, quantum physics, romantic poets, forensic science, and anthropology, among a hundred other subjects. But his favorite book was a slim volume that he'd never once read himself. It was an old hardback that his father often chose as a bedtime tale, entitled *The Crock of Gold*, which told the story of a greedy bucko who captured a leprechaun in a vain effort to steal the creature's gold.

When the father had finished reading the last word on the last page, which was *Fin*, he would close the worn leather-bound cover, smile down at his son, and say, "That boy had the right idea. A little more planning and he would have pulled it off," which was an unusual opinion for a father to voice. A *responsible* father, at any rate. But this was not a typically responsible parent—this was Artemis Fowl Senior, the kingpin of one of the world's largest criminal empires. The son was not so typical either. He was Artemis Fowl II, soon to become a formidable individual in his own right, both in the world of man and the fairy world beneath it.

A little more planning, Artemis Junior often thought as his father kissed his forehead. Just a little more planning.

And he would fall asleep and dream of gold.

As young Artemis grew older, he often thought about *The Crock of Gold*. He even went so far as to do a little research during schooltime and was surprised to find a lot of credible evidence for the existence of the fairy folk. These hours of study and planning were nothing but lighthearted distractions for the boy until the day his father disappeared in the Arctic following a *misunderstanding* with the Russian Mafiya. The Fowl empire quickly disintegrated, with creditors crawling out of the woodwork and debtors burrowing into it.

It is up to me, Artemis realized. To rebuild our fortune and find Father.

So he dusted off the leprechaun folder. He would catch a fairy and ransom it back to its own people for gold.

Only a juvenile genius could make this plan a success, Artemis correctly concluded. Someone old enough to grasp the principles of commerce, yet young enough to believe in magic.

With the help of his more than capable bodyguard, Butler, twelve-year-old Artemis actually succeeded in capturing a leprechaun and holding it captive in Fowl Manor's reinforced basement. But this leprechaun was a *she* not an *it*. And remarkably humanoid with it. What Artemis had previously thought of as temporarily detaining a lesser creature now seemed uncomfortably like abducting a girl.

There were other complications too: these leprechauns were not the hokey fairies of storybooks. They were high-tech creatures with attitude, members of an elite fairy police squad: the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance Unit, or LEPrecon, to use their acronym. And Artemis had kidnapped Holly Short, the first female captain in the unit's history. An act that had not endeared him to the well-armed fairy underworld.

But in spite of a niggling conscience and LEP attempts to derail his plan, Artemis managed to take delivery of his ill-gotten gold, and in return he released the elfin captain.

So, all's well that ends well?

Not really.

No sooner had the earth settled from the first fairy– human standoff in decades than the LEP uncovered a plot to supply the goblin gangs with power sources for their softnose lasers. Number one suspect: Artemis Fowl. Holly Short hauled the Irish boy down to Haven City for interrogation, only to discover, to her amazement, that Artemis Fowl was actually innocent of something. The two struck an uneasy bargain, where Artemis agreed to track down the goblins' supplier if Holly would help him to rescue his father from the Russian gang that held him prisoner. Both parties upheld their respective ends of the bargain, and in the process developed a respect and trust for each other that was underpinned by a shared sharp sense of humor.

Or at least this used to be the case. Recently, things have changed. In some ways he is as sharp as ever, but a shadow has fallen across Artemis's mind.

Once upon a time, Artemis saw things that no one else could see, but now he sees things that are not there. . . .

Vatnajökull, Iceland

Vatnajökull is the biggest glacier in Europe, with an area of more than five thousand stark blue-white miles. It is, for the most part, uninhabited and desolate and, for scientific reasons, the perfect place for Artemis Fowl to demonstrate to the Fairy People how exactly he planned to save the world. Also, a little dramatic scenery never hurts a presentation.

One part of Vatnajökull that does see human traffic is the Great Skua restaurant on the shores of the glacier lagoon, which caters to groups of ice tourists from May to August. Artemis had arranged to meet the proprietor at this *closed for the season* establishment very early on the morning of September first. His fifteenth birthday.

Artemis steered his rented snowmobile along the lagoon's rippling coastline, where the glacier sloped into a black pool dotted with a crazy-paving pattern of broken ice plates. The wind roared around his head like an excited crowd in a stadium, carrying with it arrowheads of sleet that peppered his nose and mouth. The space was vast and unforgiving, and Artemis knew that to be injured alone on this tundra would lead to a quick and painful death—or at the very least abject humiliation before the popping flashes of the tourist season's tail end, which was slightly less painful than a painful death, but lasted longer.

The Great Skua's owner—a burly Icelander in proud possession of both a walrus mustache with the wingspan of a fair-sized cormorant and the unlikely name of Adam Adamsson—stood in the restaurant's porch, popping his fingers and stamping his feet to an imaginary rhythm and also finding the time to chuckle at Artemis's erratic progress along the lagoon's frozen shore.

“That was a mighty display,” said Adamsson when Artemis finally managed to ram the snowmobile into the restaurant's decking. “Hell, *harður maður*. I haven't laughed that hard since my dog tried to eat his reflection.”

Artemis smiled dourly, aware that the restaurateur was poking fun at his driving skills, or lack thereof. “Hmmp,” he grunted, dismounting the Ski-Doo as stiffly as a cowboy after three days on a cattle drive, whose horse had died, forcing him to ride the broadest cow in the herd.

The old man actually cackled. “Now you even sound like my dog.”

It was not Artemis Fowl's habit to make undignified entrances, but without his bodyguard Butler on hand, he had been forced to rely on his own motor skills, which were famously unsophisticated. One of the sixth-year wits at St. Bartleby's School, the heir to a hotel fortune, had nicknamed Artemis *Left Foot Fowl*, as in he had two left feet and couldn't kick a football with either of them. Artemis had tolerated this ribbing for about a week and then bought out the young heir's hotel chain. This choked the teasing off abruptly.

“Everything is ready, I trust?” said Artemis, flexing fingers inside his patented Sola-Gloves. He noticed that one hand was uncomfortably warm; the thermostat must have taken a knock when he'd clipped an ice obelisk half a mile down the coast. He tugged out the power wire with his teeth; there was not much danger of hypothermia, as the autumn temperature hovered just below zero.

“And hello to you,” said Adamsson. “Nice to finally meet you face-to-face, if not eye-to-eye.”

Artemis did not rise to the forge-a-relationship lure that Adamsson had tossed out. He did not have room in his life at the moment for yet another friend that he didn't trust.

“I do not intend to ask you for your daughter’s hand in marriage, Mr. Adamsson, so I think we can skip over any icebreakers you may feel obliged to offer. Is everything ready?”

Adam Adamsson’s pre-prepared icebreakers melted in his throat, and he nodded half a dozen times.

“All ready. Your crate is around the back. I have supplied a vegetarian buffet and goody bags from the Blue Lagoon Spa. A few seats have been laid out too, as bluntly requested in your terse e-mail. None of your party turned up, though—nobody but you—after all my labors.”

Artemis lifted an aluminium briefcase from the SkiDoo’s luggage box. “Don’t you worry about that, Mr. Adamsson. Why don’t you head back to Reykjavík and spend some of that extortionate fee you charged me for a couple of hours’ usage of your frankly third-rate restaurant and perhaps find a friendless tree stump to listen to your woes?”

A couple of hours. Third-rate. Two plus three equals five. Good.

Now it was Adamsson’s turn to grunt, and the tips of his walrus mustache quivered slightly.

“No need for the attitude, young Fowl. We are both men, are we not? Men are entitled to a little respect.”

“Oh, really? Perhaps we should ask the whales? Or perhaps the mink?”

Adamsson scowled, his windburned face creasing like a prune. “Okay, okay. I get the message. No need to hold me responsible for the crimes of man. You teenagers are all the same. Let’s see if your generation does any better with the planet.”

Artemis clicked the briefcase’s lock snap precisely twenty times before striding into the restaurant.

“Believe me, we teenagers are not all the same,” he said as he passed Adamsson. “And I intend to do quite a bit better.”

There were more than a dozen tables inside the restaurant, all with chairs stacked on top, except for one, which had been dressed with a linen cloth and laden with bottled glacier water and spa bags for each of the five places.

Five, thought Artemis. A good number. Solid. Predictable. Four fives are twenty.

Artemis had decided lately that five was his number. Good things happened when five was in the mix. The logician in him knew that this was ridiculous, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that the tragedies in his life had occurred in years not divisible by five: his father had disappeared and been mutilated, his old friend Commander Julius Root of the LEP had been murdered by the notorious pixie Opal Koboi, both in years with no five. He was five feet five inches tall and weighed fifty-five kilos. If he touched something five times or a multiple of that, then that thing stayed reliable. A door would remain closed, for example, or a keepsake would protect that doorway, as it was supposed to.

Today the signs were good. He was fifteen years old. Three times five. And his hotel room in Reykjavík had been number forty-five. Even the Ski-Doo that had got him this far unscathed had a registration that was a multiple of five, and boasted a fifty cc engine to boot. All good. There were only four guests coming to the meeting, but including him that made five. So no need to panic.

A part of Artemis was horrified by his newfound superstition about numbers.

Get a grip on yourself. You are a Fowl. We do not rely on luck—abandon these ridiculous obsessions and compulsions.

Artemis clicked the case’s latch to appease the number gods—twenty times, four fives—and felt his heart slow down.

I will break my habits tomorrow, when this job is done.

He loitered at the maître d's podium until Adamsson and his snow tractor had disappeared over a curved ridge of snow that could have been a whale's spine, then waited a further minute until the vehicle's rumbling had faded to an old smoker's cough.

Very well. Time to do some business.

Artemis descended the five wooden steps to the main restaurant floor (*excellent, good omen*), threading a series of columns hung with replicas of the Stóra-Borg mask until he arrived at the head of the laid table. The seats were angled to face him, and a slight shimmer, like a heat haze, flickered over the tabletop.

"Good morning, friends," said Artemis in Gnommish, forcing himself to pronounce the fairy words in confident, almost jovial, tones. "Today's the day we save the world."

The heat haze seemed more electrical now with crackles of neon-white interference running through it, and faces swimming in its depths like ghosts from a dream. The faces solidified and grew torsos and limbs. Small figures, like children, appeared. Like children, but not the same. These were representatives of the Fairy People, and among them perhaps the only friends Artemis had.

"Save the world?" said Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon. "Same old Artemis Fowl, and I say that sarcastically, as *saving the world* is not like you at all."

Artemis knew he should smile, but he could not, so instead he found fault, something that would not seem out of character.

"You need a new shield amplifier, Foaly," he said to a centaur who was balanced awkwardly on a chair designed for humans. "I could see the shimmer from the front porch. Call yourself a technical expert? How old is the one you're using?"

Foaly stamped a hoof, which was an irritated tic of his and the reason he never won at cards. "Nice to see you too, Mud Boy."

"How old?"

"I don't know. Maybe four years."

"Four. There, you see. What sort of number is that?"

Foaly stuck out his bottom lip. "What *sort* of number? There are *types* now, Artemis? That amplifier is good for another hundred years. Maybe it could do with a little tuning, but that's all."

Holly stood and walked lightly to the head of the table.

"Do you two have to start with the sparring right away? Isn't that getting a little clichéd after all these years? You're like a couple of mutts marking territory." She laid two slim fingers on Artemis's forearm. "Lay off him, Artemis. You know how sensitive centaurs are."

Artemis could not meet her eyes. Inside his left snow boot, he counted off twenty toe-taps.

"Very well. Let's change the subject."

"Please do," said the third fairy in the room. "We've come across from Russia for this, Fowl. So if the subject could be changed to what we came here to discuss . . ."

Commander Raine Vinyáya was obviously not happy being so far from her beloved Police Plaza. She had assumed command of LEPrecon some years previously and prided herself on keeping a finger in every ongoing mission. "I have operations to get back to, Artemis. The pixies are rioting, calling for Opal Koboi's release from prison, and the swear toad epidemic has flared up again. Please do us the courtesy of getting on with it."

Artemis nodded. Vinyáya was being openly antagonistic, and that was an emotion that could be trusted, unless of course it was a bluff and the commander was a secret fan of his, unless it was a double bluff and she really did feel antagonistic.

That sounds insane, Artemis realized. Even to me.

Though she was barely forty inches tall, Commander Vinyáya was a formidable presence and someone that Artemis never intended to underestimate. While the commander was almost four centuries old in fairy years, she was barely middle-aged, and in any terms she was a striking figure: lean and sallow, with the reactive feline pupils occasionally found in elfin eyes, but even that rarity was not her most distinctive physical characteristic. Raine Vinyáya had a mane of silver hair that seemed to trap any available light and send it rippling along her shoulders.

Artemis cleared his throat and switched his focus from numbers to the project, or, as he liked to think of it, *THE PROJECT*. In the end, when it came down to it, this was the only plan that mattered.

Holly punched his shoulder gently.

“You look pale. Even paler than usual. You okay, birthday boy?”

Artemis finally succeeded in meeting her eyes—one hazel, one blue—framed by a wide brow and a slash of auburn fringe, which Holly had grown out from her usual crew cut.

“Fifteen years old today,” muttered Artemis. “Three fives. That’s a good thing.”

Holly blinked.

Artemis Fowl muttering? And no mention of her new hairstyle— usually Artemis picked up on physical changes straight away.

“I . . . ah . . . I suppose so. Where’s Butler? Scouting the perimeter?”

“No. No, I sent him away. Juliet needed him.”

“Nothing too serious?”

“Not serious but necessary. Family business. He trusts you to look after me.”

Holly’s lips tightened as though she had tasted something sour.

“He trusts somebody else to shepherd his principal? Are you sure this is Butler we’re talking about?”

“Of course. And anyway, it’s better that he’s not here. Whenever my plans go awry, he’s close at hand. It’s vital, *imperative*, that this meeting go ahead and that nothing goes wrong.”

Holly’s jaw actually dropped in shock. It was almost comical to see. If she understood Artemis correctly, he was *blaming* Butler for the failure of previous schemes. Butler? His staunchest ally?

“Good idea. Let’s go ahead, then. The four of us should get this show on the road.”

This from Foaly, who had spoken the dreaded number with no thought for the consequences.

Four. Very bad number. The absolute worst. Chinese people hate the number four because it sounds like their word for death.

Almost worse than saying the number four was the fact that there were only four people in the room. Commander Trouble Kelp had apparently not been able to make it. In spite of their historic dislike for each other, Artemis wished the commander were here now.

“Where is Commander Kelp, Holly? I thought he was attending today. We could use the protection.”

Holly stood at the table, ramrod straight in her blue jumpsuit, acorn cluster glittering on her chest.

“Trouble . . . Commander Kelp has enough to deal with in Police Plaza, but don’t worry. There’s an entire squadron of LEPtactical hovering overhead in a shielded shuttle. Not even a snow fox could make it in here without a singed tail.”

Artemis shucked off his snow jacket and gloves. “Thank you, Captain. I am encouraged by your thoroughness. As a matter of interest, how many fairies are there in an LEP squadron? Exactly?”

“Fourteen,” replied Holly, one jagged eyebrow raised.

“Fourteen. Hmm. That is not so . . .” Then a lightbulb moment. “And a pilot, I presume?”

“Fourteen *including* the pilot. That’s enough to take on any human squadron you care to throw at them.”

For a moment it seemed as though Artemis Fowl would turn around and flee the meeting that he himself had requested. A tendon tugged at his neck, and one forefinger tapped the chair’s wooden headrest. Then Artemis swallowed and nodded with a nervousness that escaped from him like a canary from a cat’s mouth before being swallowed back down.

“Very well. Fourteen will have to do. Please, Holly, sit. Let me tell you about the project.”

Holly backed up slowly, searching Artemis’s face for the cockiness that usually dwelled in his smirk lines. It was not there.

Whatever this project is, she thought, it’s big.

Artemis placed his case on the table, popped it open, and spun the lid to reveal a screen inside. For a moment his delight in gadgetry surfaced, and he even managed a faint grin in Foaly’s direction. The grin stretched his lips no more than an inch.

“Look. You’ll like this little box.”

Foaly snickered. “Oh my stars! Is that . . . could that possibly be . . . a laptop? You have shamed us all with your brilliance, Arty.”

The centaur’s sarcasm drew groans from everyone.

“What?” he protested. “It’s a laptop. Even humans can’t expect anyone to be impressed by a laptop.”

“If I know Artemis,” said Holly, “something impressive is about to happen. Am I right?”

“You may judge for yourself,” said Artemis, pressing his thumb against a scanner on the case.

The scanner flickered, considering the proffered thumb, then flashed green, deciding to accept it. Nothing happened for a second or two, then a motor inside the case buzzed as though there were a small satisfied cat stretching in the case’s belly.

“Motor,” said Foaly. “Big deal.”

The lid’s reinforced metal corners suddenly detached, blasting away from the lid with a squirt of propellant, and suckered themselves to the ceiling. Simultaneously, the screen unfolded until it was more than three feet square with speaker bars along each edge.

“So it’s a big screen,” Foaly said. “This is just grandstanding. All we needed were a few sets of V-goggles.”

Artemis pressed another button on the case, and the metal corners suckered to the ceiling revealed themselves to be projectors, spewing forth streams of digi-data that coalesced in the center of the room to form a rotating model of the planet Earth. The screen displayed the Fowl Industries company logo surrounded by a number of files.

“It’s a holographic case,” said Foaly, delighted to remain unimpressed. “We’ve had those for years.”

“It is not a holographic case—the case is completely real,” corrected Artemis. “But the images you will see are holographic. I have made a few upgrades to the LEP system. The case is synced with several satellites, and the onboard computers can construct real-time images of objects not inside the sensors’ range.”

“I’ve got one of those at home,” mumbled the centaur. “For my kids’ game console.”

“And the system has smart interactive intelligence so I can construct or alter models by hand, so long as I’m wearing V-gloves,” Artemis went on.

Foaly scowled. “Okay, Mud Boy. That *is* good.” But he couldn’t help adding the P.S.: “For a human.”

Vinyáya’s pupils contracted in the light from the projectors. “This is all very pretty, Fowl, but we still don’t know the point of this meeting.”

Artemis stepped into the hologram and inserted his hands into two V-gloves floating over Australia. The gloves were slightly transparent with thick tubular digits and an unsophisticated polystyrene-look render. Once again the briefcase’s sensor flickered thoughtfully before deciding to accept Artemis’s hands. The gloves beeped softly and shrank to form a second skin around his fingers, each knuckle highlighted by a digi-marker.

“Earth,” he began, ignoring the impulse to open his notes folder and count the words. He knew this lecture by heart.

“Our home. She feeds us, she shelters us. Her gravity prevents us from flying off into space and freezing, before thawing out again and being crisped by the sun, none of which really matters, as we would have long since asphyxiated.” Artemis paused for laughter and was surprised when it did not arrive. “That was a little joke. I read in a presentation manual that a joke often serves to break the ice. And I actually worked icebreaking into the joke, so there were layers to my humor.”

“That was a joke?” said Vinyáya. “I’ve had officers court-martialed for less.”

“If I had some rotten fruit, I would throw it,” added Foaly. “Why don’t you do the science and leave the jokes to people with experience?”

Artemis frowned, upset that he had ad-libbed, and now could not be certain how many words were in his presentation. If he finished on a multiple of four that was not also a multiple of five, that could be very bad. Perhaps he should start again? But that was cheating, and the number gods would simply add the two speeches together and he’d be no better off.

Complicated. So hard to keep track, even for me.

But he would continue because it was imperative that *THE PROJECT* be presented now, today, so that *THE PRODUCT* could go into fabrication immediately. So Artemis contained the uncertainty in his heart and launched into the presentation with gusto, barely stopping to draw breath, in case his courage deserted him.

“Man is the biggest threat to Earth. We gut the planet of its fossil fuels then turn those same fuels against the planet through global warming.” Artemis pointed a V-finger at the enlarged screen, opening one video file after another, each one illustrating a point. “The world’s glaciers are losing as much as six feet of ice cover per annum, that’s half a million square miles in the Arctic Ocean alone in the past thirty years.” Behind him the video files displayed some of the consequences of global warming.

“The world needs to be saved,” said Artemis. “I realize now, finally, that I must be the one to save it. *This* is why I am a genius. My very *raison d’être*.”

Vinyáya tapped the table with her index finger. “There is a lobby in Haven, which has quite a lot of support, that says roll on global warming. The humans will wipe themselves out and then we can take back the planet.”

Artemis was ready for that one. “An obvious argument, Commander, but it’s not just the humans, is it?” He opened a few more video windows and the fairies watched scenes of scrawny polar bears stranded on ice floes, moose in Michigan being eaten alive by an increased tick population, and bleached coral reefs devoid of all life.

“It’s every living thing on or underneath this planet.”

Foaly was actually quite annoyed by the presentation. “Do you think we haven’t thought about

this, Mud Boy? Do you think that this particular problem has not been on the mind of every scientist in Haven and Atlantis? To be honest, I find this lecture patronizing.”

Artemis shrugged. “How you feel is unimportant. How I feel is unimportant. Earth needs to be saved.”

Holly sat up straight. “Don’t tell me you’ve found the answer.”

“I think so.”

Foaly snorted. “Really? Let me guess: wrap the icebergs, maybe? Or shoot refracting lenses into the atmosphere?

How about customized cloud cover? Am I getting warm?”

“We are all getting warm,” said Artemis. “That is the problem.” He picked up the Earth hologram with one hand and spun it like a basketball. “All of those solutions could work, with some modifications. But they require too much interstate cooperation, and, as we all know, human governments are not good at sharing their toys. Perhaps, in fifty years’ time, things might change, but by then it will be too late.”

Commander Vinyáya had always prided herself on an ability to read a situation, and her instincts were loud in her ears like the roar of Pacific surf. This was a historic moment: the very air seemed electric.

“Go on, human,” she said quietly, her words buoyed by authority. “Tell us.”

Artemis used the V-gloves to highlight Earth’s glaciated areas and rearranged the ice mass into a square. “Covering glaciers is an excellent idea, but even if the topography were this simple—a flat square—it would take several armies half a century to get the job done.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Foaly. “Human loggers seem to be getting through the rain forests a lot quicker than that.”

“Those on the fringes of the law move faster than those bound by it, which is where I come in.”

Foaly crossed his front legs, which is not easy for a centaur in a chair. “Do tell. I am all ears.”

“I shall,” said Artemis. “And I would be grateful if you would stifle the usual expressions of horror and disbelief until I conclude. Your cries of astonishment every time I present an idea are most tiresome and they make it difficult to keep track of the word count.”

“Oh my gods!” exclaimed Foaly. “Unbelievable.”

Raine Vinyáya threw the centaur a warning look. “Stop acting the bull troll, Foaly. I’ve come a long way for this and my ears are very cold.”

“Should I pinch one of the centaur’s nerve clusters to keep him quiet?” asked Holly with barely a grin. “I have studied centaur incapacitation, as well as human, if we happen to need it. I could knock out everybody here with one finger or a sturdy pencil.”

Foaly was eighty percent sure that Holly was bluffing, but all the same he covered the ganglia over his ears with cupped fingers.

“Very well. I’ll keep quiet.”

“Good. Proceed, Artemis.”

“Thank you. But keep your sturdy pencil at the ready, Captain Short. I have a feeling that there could be some disbelief on the way.”

Holly patted her pocket and winked. “2B hard graphite, nothing better for a quick organ rupture.”

Holly was joking, but her heart wasn’t in it. Artemis felt that her comments were camouflage for whatever anxiety she was feeling. He rubbed his brow with a thumb and forefinger, using the gesture as cover to sneak a peek at his friend. Holly’s own brow was drawn in and her eyes narrow with worry.

She knows, realized Artemis, but what Holly knew, he could not say exactly. She knows that something is different, that the even numbers have turned against me. Two twos are four fairies spitting bad luck on my plans.

Then Artemis reviewed this last sentence, and for a second its lunacy was clear to him and he felt a fat coiled snake of panic heavy in his stomach.

Could I have a brain tumor? he wondered. That would explain the obsessions, the hallucinations, and the paranoia. Or is it simply obsessive-compulsive disorder? The great Artemis Fowl felled by a common ailment.

Artemis spared a moment to try an old hypnotherapist's trick.

Picture yourself in a good place. Somewhere you were happy and safe.

Happy and safe? It had been a while.

Artemis allowed his mind to fly, and he found himself sitting on a small stool in his grandfather's workshop. His grandfather looked a little sneakier than Artemis remembered, and he winked at his five-year-old grandson and said, *Do you know how many legs are on that stool, Arty? Three. Only three, and that's not a good number for you. Not at all. Three is nearly as bad as four, and we all know what four sounds like in Chinese, don't we?*

Artemis shuddered. This sickness was even corrupting his memories. He pressed the forefinger and thumb of his left hand together until the pads turned white. A trigger he'd taught himself to elicit calm when the number panic grew too strong. But the trigger was working less and less recently, or in this case not at all.

I am losing my composure, he thought with quiet desperation. This disease is winning.

Foaly cleared his throat, puncturing Artemis's dream bubble. "Hello? Mud Boy? Important people waiting, get a move on."

And from Holly. "Are you okay, Artemis? Do you need to take a break?"

Artemis almost laughed. *Take a break during a presentation? If I did that, I might as well go and stand beside someone wearing an i'm with crazy T-shirt.*

"No. I'm fine. This is a big project, the biggest. I want to be sure that my presentation is perfect."

Foaly leaned forward until his already unsteady chair teetered dangerously. "You don't look fine, Mud Boy. You look . . ." The centaur sucked his bottom lip, searching for the right word. "Beaten. Artemis, you look beaten."

Which was the best thing he could have possibly said.

Artemis drew himself up. "I think, Foaly, that perhaps you do not read human expressions well. Perhaps our faces are too short. I am not beaten by any manner or means. I am considering my every word."

"Maybe you should consider a little faster," advised Holly gently. "We are quite exposed here."

Artemis closed his eyes, collecting himself.

Vinyaya drummed the table with her fingers. "No more delays, human. I am beginning to suspect that you have involved us in one of your notorious plans."

"No. This is a genuine proposal. Please, hear me out."

"I'm trying to. I want to. I came a long way for that exact purpose, but all you do is show off with your suitcase."

Artemis raised his hands to shoulder level, the movement activating his V-gloves, and tapped the glacier.

"What we need to do is cover a significant area of the world's glaciers with a reflective coating to

slow down the melt. The coating would have to be thicker around the edges, where the ice is thawing more rapidly. Also it would be nice if we could plug the larger sinkholes.”

“A lot of things would be *nice* in a perfect world,” said Foaly, once again making smithereens of his promise to keep quiet. “Don’t you think your people would get a tad upset if little creatures popped out of the ground in spaceships and started carpeting Santa’s grotto with reflective foil?”

“They . . . we . . . would. And that is why this operation has to be carried out in secret.”

“Secretly coat the world’s glaciers? You should have said.”

“I just did say, and I thought we agreed that you would hold your peace. This constant haranguing is tiresome.”

Holly winked at Foaly, twirling a pencil between her fingers.

“The problem with coating the icebergs has always been how to deploy the reflective blanket,” continued Artemis. “It would seem that the only way to do it would be to roll the stuff out like carpet, either manually or from the rear of some kind of customized snow crawlers.”

“Which is hardly a stealth operation,” said Foaly.

“Exactly. But what if there were another way to lay down a reflective covering, a seemingly natural way.”

“Work with nature?”

“Yes, Foaly. Nature is our model; it should always be.”

The room seemed to be heating up as Artemis drew closer to his big reveal.

“Human scientists have been struggling to make their reflective foil thin enough to work with, yet strong enough to withstand the elements.”

“Stupid.”

“Misguided, centaur. Not stupid, surely. Your own files—”

“I considered the foil idea briefly. And how did you see my files?”

This was not a real question. Foaly had long since resigned himself to the fact that Artemis Fowl was at least as talented a hacker as he himself was.

“The basic idea is sound. Fabricate a reflective polymer.”

Foaly chewed his knuckles. “Nature. Use nature.”

“What is the most natural thing up here?” said Artemis, giving a little hint.

“Ice,” said Holly. “Ice and . . .”

“Snow,” whispered the centaur almost reverentially. “Of course. D’Arvit, why didn’t I . . . Snow, isn’t it?”

Artemis raised his V-gloved hands, and holographic snow rained upon them.

“Snow,” he said, the blizzard swirling around him. “No one would be surprised by snow.”

Foaly was on his feet. “Magnify,” he ordered. “Magnify and enhance.”

Artemis tapped a holographic flake, freezing it in midair. With a couple of pinches he enlarged the ersatz flake until its irregularity became clear. It was irregularly regular, a perfect circle.

“A nano-wafer,” said Foaly, forgetting for once to hide how impressed he was. “An honest-to-gods nano-wafer. Smart?”

“Extremely,” confirmed Artemis. “Smart enough to know which way is up when it hits the surface and configure itself to insulate the ice and reflect the sun.”

“So we impregnate the cloud province?”

“Exactly, to its capacity.”

Foaly clopped into the holographic weather. “Then when it ruptures, we have coverage.”

“Incremental, true, but effective nonetheless.”

“Mud Boy, I salute you.”

Artemis smiled, his old self for a moment. “Well, it’s about time.”

Vinyáya interrupted the science lovefest. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight: you shoot these wafers into the clouds and then they come down with the snow?”

“Precisely. We could shoot them directly on to the surface in dire cases, but I think for security it would be best to have the seeders hovering and shielded above the cloud cover.”

“And you can do this?”

“We can do it. The Council would have to approve an entire fleet of modified shuttles, not to mention a monitoring station.”

Holly thought of something. “These wafers don’t look much like snowflakes. Sooner or later some human with a microscope is going to notice the difference.”

“Good point, Holly. Perhaps I shouldn’t lump you in with the rest of the LEP as regards intellect.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“When the wafers are discovered, as they inevitably will be, I will launch an Internet campaign that explains them away as a by-product from a chemical plant in Russia. I will also point out that for once our waste is actually helping the environment and volunteer to fund a program that will extend their coverage.”

“Is there a pollution factor?” asked Vinyáya.

“Hardly. The wafers are entirely biodegradable.”

Foaly was excited. He clip-clopped through the hologram, squinting at the enlarged wafer.

“It *sounds* good. But is it really? You hardly expect the People to stump up the massive and ongoing budget for such a project without proof, Artemis. For all we know, it’s one of your scams.”

Artemis opened a file on the screen. “Here are my financial records. I know they are accurate, Foaly, because I found them on your server.”

Foaly did not even bother blushing. “They look about right.”

“I am prepared to invest everything I have in this project. That should keep five shuttles in the air for a couple of years. There will be profit on the back end, naturally, when the wafers go into production. I should recoup my investment then, perhaps even turn a respectable profit.”

Foaly almost gagged. *Artemis Fowl putting his own money into a project. Incredible.*

“Of course, I hardly expect the People to take anything I say on face value. After all, I have been”—Artemis cleared his throat—“somewhat less than forthcoming with information in the past.”

Vinyáya laughed humorlessly. “Less than forthcoming? I think you’re being a little gentle on yourself, for a kidnapper and extortionist, Artemis. *Less than forthcoming?*

Please. I find myself buying your pitch, but not everybody on the Council is as charitable toward you.”

“I accept your criticism and your skepticism, which is why I have organized a demonstration.”

“Excellent,” said Foaly eagerly. “Of course there’s a demonstration. Why else would you have brought us here?”

“Why else indeed.”

“More extortion and kidnapping?” suggested Vinyáya archly.

“That was a long time ago,” blurted Holly, in a tone she would not usually take with a superior

officer. "I mean . . . that was a long time ago . . . Commander. Artemis has been a good friend to the People."

Holly Short thought specifically of a close call during the goblin rebellion when Artemis Fowl's actions had saved her life and many more besides. Vinyaya apparently remembered the goblin rebellion too. "Okay. Benefit-of-the-doubt time, Fowl. You've got twenty minutes to convince us."

Artemis patted his breast pocket five times to check on his phone.

"It shouldn't take more than ten," he said.

Holly Short was a trained hostage negotiator, and found that in spite of the importance of the topic, she was rapidly shifting focus away from nano-wafers and toward Artemis Fowl's mannerisms. Though she commented occasionally as the demonstration progressed, it was all she could do not to cradle Artemis's face in her hands and ask him what was the matter.

I would have to stand on a chair to reach his face, Holly realized. My friend is almost a grown man now. A fully fledged human. Perhaps he is fighting his natural-born bloodthirsty desires and the conflict is driving him crazy.

Holly studied Artemis closely. He was pale, more so than usual, like a creature of the night. A snow wolf maybe. The sharp cheekbones and triangular length of his face added to this impression. And perhaps it was frost, but Holly thought she could see a streak of gray at his temples.

He seems old. Foaly was right: Artemis looks beaten.

Then there was the number thing. And the touching. Artemis's fingers were never still. At first it seemed random, but on a hunch, Holly counted, and soon the pattern was clear. Fives or multiples of five.

D'Arvit, she thought. Atlantis Complex.

She ran a quick search on Wicca-pedia and came across a brief summary:

Atlantis Complex (at-lan-tis kom-pleks) is a psychosis common among guilt-ridden criminals, first diagnosed by Dr. E. Dypess of the Atlantis Brainology Clinic. Other symptoms include obsessive behavior, paranoia, delusions, and in extreme cases multiple personality disorder. Dr. E. Dypess is also known for his hit song, "I'm in Two Minds About You."

Holly thought that this last bit was possibly Wiccahumor.

Foaly had reached the same conclusion about Artemis, and said as much in a text message he buzzed over to Holly's helmet, which sat on the table before her. Holly tapped her visor to reverse the readout then read the words.

Our boy is obsessing. Atlantis?

Holly called up a Gnommish keyboard on the visor and typed, slowly, so as not to attract attention. *Maybe. Fives?* She sent the message. *Yes, fives. Classic symptom.*

Then seconds later.

A demonstration! Fab. I ♥ demonstrations.

Holly managed to keep a straight face in case Artemis happened to stop counting long enough to glance her way. Foaly could never concentrate on anything for very long, unless it was one of his beloved projects.

Must be a genius thing.

It seemed as though the Icelandic elements held their breath for Artemis's demonstration. The dull air was cut with a haze that hung in sheets like rows of laundered gauze.

The fairy folk felt their suit thermocoils vibrate a little as they followed Artemis outside to the rear of the restaurant. The back of the Adam Adamsson establishment was even less impressive than the front. Whatever lackadaisical effort had been applied to making the Great Skua hospitable obviously did not extend to the back of the building. A whale mural, which looked like Adamsson had painted it himself using a live Arctic fox for a brush, stopped abruptly over the service entrance, decapitating an unfortunate humpback. And in several spots, large sections of plaster had split from the wall and been tramped into the mud and snow.

Artemis led the small group to a tarpaulin, which had been pegged over a large cube.

Foaly snorted. "Let me guess. Looks like a common garden tarpaulin, but is actually cam foil with rear projection set to look like tarp?"

Artemis took two more steps before answering, then nodded toward everyone to fix them in their places. A bead of sweat ran down his back, generated by the stress of losing his battle to obsessive behavior.

"No, Foaly. It looks like a tarpaulin because it is a tarpaulin," he said, then added, "Yes, a tarpaulin."

Foaly blinked. "Yes, a tarpaulin? Are we in one of your Gilbert and Sullivan operettas now?" He threw his head back and sang, "I am a centaur, yes, a centaur is what I am.' It's not like you to wax, Artemis."

"Foaly is singing," said Holly. "Surely that's illegal?"

Vinyáya snapped her fingers. "Quiet, children. Contain your natural disruptive urges. I am most eager to see these nano-wafers in action before taking a shuttle closer to the warm core of our planet."

Artemis bowed slightly. "Thank you, Commander, most kind."

Five again, thought Holly. The evidence mounts.

Artemis Fowl twirled a hand at Holly Short as though introducing himself to a theater audience. "Captain, perhaps you would remove the cloth. You have an aptitude for taking things apart."

Holly was almost thrilled to have something to do. She would have preferred to have a serious talk with Artemis, but at least tackling a crate did not involve ingesting more scientific facts.

"Happy to," she said, and attacked the tarp as though it had insulted her grandmother. Suddenly there was a knuckle knife adorning the fingers of her right hand, and three judicious slices later, the tarp fluttered to the ground.

"You might as well do the crate while you are about it, Captain Short," said Artemis, wishing he could sneak in an extra word to bolster the sentence.

Immediately, Holly mounted the crate and apparently punched it into sections.

"Wow," exhaled Foaly. "That seemed excessively violent, even for you."

Holly descended to earth, barely making a footprint in the snow. "Nope. It's more of a science. *Cos tapa*. The quick foot. An ancient martial art based on the movements of predatory animals."

"Look!" said Foaly, pointing with some urgency into the vast steel-gray gloom. "Someone who cares!"

Artemis was glad of the banter, as it distracted from his loosening grasp on the logical world. While the fairies enjoyed their customary back-and-forth, he allowed his spine to curve for a moment,

let his shoulders dip, but someone noticed.

“Artemis?”

Holly, of course.

“Yes, Captain Short.”

“‘Captain’? Are we strangers, Artemis?”

Artemis coughed into his hand. She was probing. He needed to ward off her attentions. Nothing to do but say the number aloud.

“Strangers? No. We’ve known each other for more than *five* years.”

Holly took a step toward him, her eyes wide with concern behind the orange curve of visor.

“This five thing, Arty. I’m worried about that. You’re not yourself.”

Artemis swept past her to the container that rested on the floor of the crate.

“Who else would I be?” he said brusquely, cutting short any possible discussion on the state of his mental health. He waved impatiently at the ice haze as though it were deliberately obstructing him, then pointed his mobile phone at the container, zapping the computerized locks. The container looked and sounded like a regular household refrigerator, squat, pearlescent, and humming.

“Just what they need in Iceland,” muttered Foaly. “More ice makers.”

“Ah, but a very special ice maker,” said Artemis, opening the fridge door. “One that can save the glaciers.”

“Does it make Popsicles too?” asked the centaur innocently, wishing his old buddy Mulch Diggums was there so they could high-five, a practice so puerile and outmoded that it would be sure to drive Artemis crazy, if he weren’t already crazy.

“You said this was a demonstration,” snapped Vinyáya. “So demonstrate.”

Artemis shot Foaly a poisonous look. “With great pleasure, Commander. Observe.”

Inside the container sat a squat chrome contraption, which resembled a cross between a top-loader washing machine and a stubby cannon, apart from the jumble of wires and chips nestled under the bowl.

“The Ice Cube is not pretty, I grant you,” said Artemis, priming the equipment with an infrared signal shot from the sensor on his phone. “But I thought better to get production moving along than spend another month tidying the chassis.” They formed a ragged ring around the device, and Artemis could not help thinking that had a satellite been observing the group, they would have looked like children playing a game.

Vinyáya’s face was pale and her teeth chattered, though the temperature was barely below freezing. Chilly in human terms, a lot more uncomfortable for a fairy.

“Come on, human. Switch this Ice Cube thing on. Let’s get the dwarf on the mudslide.”

A fairy expression that Artemis was not familiar with, but he could guess what it meant. He glanced at his phone.

“Surely, Commander. I will certainly launch the first pouch of nano-wafers just as soon as whatever unidentified craft is passing through the airspace moves on.”

Holly consulted her visor readout communicator. “Nothing in the airspace, Mud Boy. Nothing but a shielded shuttle full of hurt for you, if you’re trying to pull some kind of trick.”

Artemis could not stifle a groan. “No need for the rhetoric. I assure you, Captain, there is a ship descending through the atmosphere. My sensors are picking it up quite clearly.”

Holly thrust her jaw forward. “Well, *my* sensors aren’t picking up a thing.”

“Funny, because my sensors *are* your sensors,” countered Artemis.

Foaly clopped a hoof, chipping the ice. "I knew it. Is nothing sacred?"

Artemis squared his shoulders. "Let's stop pretending that we don't spend half our time spying on each other. I read your files and you read the files I allow you to steal. There is a craft that seems to be heading straight for us, and maybe your sensors would spot it if you used some of the same filters I do."

Holly thought of something. "Remember Opal Koboi's ship? The one completely built from stealth ore? Our pet geeks couldn't detect that, but Artemis did."

Artemis arched his eyebrows as if to say *Even the police officer gets it*. "I simply looked for what should be there but wasn't. Ambient gases, trace pollution, and such. Wherever I found an apparent vacuum I also found Opal. I have since applied the same technique to my general scans. I am surprised you haven't learned that little trick, *Consultant Foaly*."

"It will take about two seconds to sync with our shuttle and run an ambience test."

Vinyáya scowled, and her annoyance seemed to ripple the air like a heatwave.

"Run it then, centaur."

Foaly activated the sensors in his gloves and screwed a yellow monocle over one eye. Thus wired, he performed a complicated series of blinks, winks, and gestures as he interfaced with a V-system invisible to all but him. To the casual observer it would seem as though the centaur had inhaled pepper while conducting an imaginary orchestra. It was not attractive, which was why most people tended to stick with hardwired hardware.

Twenty seconds more than two seconds later, Foaly's exertions ceased suddenly and he rested palms on knees.

"Okay," he panted. "Firstly, I am nobody's *pet geek*. And secondly, there may be a large unidentified space vehicle headed our way at high speed."

Holly instantly drew her weapon, as though she could gun down a spaceship that was already falling on them.

Artemis rushed toward his Ice Cube, arms outstretched maternally, then literally stopped in his tracks as suspicion filled his heart with heat.

"This is your ship, Foaly. Admit it."

"It's not my ship," protested Foaly. "I don't even have a ship. I come to work on a quadricycle."

Artemis fought the paranoia until his hands shook, but there seemed to be no other explanation for the arrival of a strange ship at this precise time.

"You're trying to steal my invention. This is just like the time in London when you interfered in the C-Cube deal."

Holly kept her eyes on the skies, but spoke to her human friend.

"I *saved* Butler in London."

Artemis's whole frame was shaking now. "Did you? Or did you *turn* him against me?" The words he spoke disgusted him, but they seemed to push through his lips like scarab beetles from the mouth of a mummy. "That's when you made your alliance against me, wasn't it? How much did you offer him?"

For a long foggy breath, Holly was speechless; then, "Offer him? Butler would never betray you. Never! How can you think that, Artemis?"

Artemis glared at his fingers as if he half hoped they would reach up and strangle him. "I know you're behind this, Holly Short. You have never forgiven me for the kidnapping."

"You need help, Artemis," said Holly, tired of talking around the problem. "I think you may have a

condition. It might be something called the Atlantis Complex.”

Artemis stumbled backward, knocking against Foaly’s hindquarters. “I know,” he said slowly, watching his breath take form before him. “Lately, nothing is clear. I see things, suspect everyone. Five. Five is everywhere.”

“As if we would ever do anything to hurt you, Artemis,” said Foaly, patting the hair Artemis had ruffled.

“I don’t know. Would you? Why wouldn’t you? I have the most important job on Earth, more important than yours.”

Holly was calling in the cavalry.

“There’s a UC in the atmo,” she called into her communicator, using that soldier shorthand that seemed more confusing than plain speaking. “Descend to my seven for evac. Stat.”

A fairy shuttle fizzled into visibility twenty feet overhead. It appeared plate by plate from nose to stern, the soldiers inside visible for a brief moment before the hull solidified. The sight seemed to confuse Artemis even further.

“Is that how you’re going to take me? Scare me into voluntarily coming aboard, then steal my Ice Cube?”

“It’s always cubes with you,” noted Foaly somewhat randomly. “What’s wrong with a nice sphere?”

“And you, centaur!” said Artemis, pointing an accusing finger. “Always in my system. Are you in my head too?”

Vinyáya had forgotten the cold. She shrugged off her heavy coat to gain some ease of movement.

“Captain Short. The crazed human is your contact— put him on a leash until we get out of here.”

It was an unfortunate phrase to use.

“Put me on a leash? Is that what you’ve been doing all this time, Captain Short?”

Artemis was shivering now, as though a current had passed through his limbs.

“Artemis,” said Holly urgently. “Wouldn’t you like to sleep for a while? Just lay your head down somewhere warm and sleep?”

The notion took hold in some corner of Artemis’s brain. “Yes. Sleep. Can you do that, Holly?”

Holly took a slow step forward. “Of course I can. Just a little *mesmer* is all it takes. You’ll wake up a new man.”

Artemis’s eyes seemed to jellify. “A new man. But what about *THE PROJECT*?”

Easy now, thought Holly. Move in gently. “We can take care of it when you wake up.” She slipped the thinnest wafer of magic into her upper registers; to Artemis it would sound like the tinkling of crystal bells on every consonant.

“Sleep,” said Artemis softly, in case volume broke the word. ““To sleep, perchance to dream.””

“Quoting theater now?” said Foaly. “Do we really have the time?”

Holly hushed him with a glare, then took another step toward Artemis.

“Just a few hours. We can take you away from here, from whatever’s coming.”

“Away from here,” echoed the troubled boy.

“Then we can talk about the project.”

The shuttle’s pilot fluffed his approach, carving a shallow trench in the surface with his rear stabilizer. The cacophonous splintering of sugar-glass-thin ice plates was enough to sharpen Artemis’s pupils.

“No!” he shouted, his voice shrill for once. “No magic. One two three four five. Stay where you are.”

A second craft introduced itself to the melodrama, appearing suddenly in the distant skyscape as though crashing through from an alternate dimension. Huge and sleek like a spiraling ice-cream cone, trailing tethered boosters, one errant engine detaching and spinning off into the heavy gray clouds. For such a huge ship, it made very little noise.

Artemis was shocked by the sight. Aliens? was his first thought; then, Wait, not aliens. I have seen this before. A schematic at least.

Foaly was having the same thought. “You know, that looks familiar.”

Entire sections of the giant ship were flickering out of sight as it cooled down from its steep atmospheric entry, or re-entry, as it turned out.

“That’s one from your space program,” said Artemis accusingly.

“It’s possible,” Foaly admitted, a guilty tinge blossoming on his rear cheeks, another reason he lost at poker. “Difficult to tell with all the erratic movements and so forth.”

The LEP shuttle finally touched down, popping a hatch on its port side.

“Everyone in,” ordered Vinyáya. “We need to put a little distance between us and that ship.”

Foaly was three or four steps ahead. “No. No, this is one of ours. It shouldn’t be here, but we can still control it.”

Holly snorted. “Sure. You’re doing a great job of it so far.”

This comment was one more than the centaur could bear. He finally snapped, rearing majestically on his hind legs, then bringing his front hooves smashing down on the thin ice.

“Enough!” he roared. “There is a deep-space probe bearing down on us. And even if its nuclear generator does not explode, the impact blast wave alone will be enough to destroy everything in a fifteen-mile radius, so unless that shuttle of yours can travel to another dimension, boarding will be about as much use as *you* would be at a scientific convention.”

Holly shrugged. “Fair enough. What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you shut up and let me deal with this problem.”

The term *probe* generally brings to mind a small, spare craft, with perhaps a few sample jars in its hold and maybe a rack of super-efficient solar cells clamped to its back, but this machine was the polar opposite of such an image. It was huge and violent in its movement, jarring the air as it bludgeoned through, jumping in lurching leaps, dragging tethered engines behind like captured slaves.

“This thing,” muttered Foaly, blinking to activate his monocle, “seemed friendlier when I designed it.”

The soldiers were ordered to hold their positions, and the entire group could only watch as the giant ship bore down on them, screaming ever louder as its soundproofing waffling was scored. Atmospheric friction tore at the probe with jagged fingers, tearing huge octagonal plates from the hull. And all the while Foaly tried to gain control of it.

“What I’m doing is going through the shuttle’s antennae to get a good fix on the probe’s computer, see if I can find the malfunction and then maybe I can program in a nice friendly hover at thirty yards. A little more shield would be nice too.”

“Less explaining,” said Vinyáya through gritted teeth, “and more fixing.”

Foaly kept up his line of drivel as he worked. “Come on, Commander. I know you military types thrive on these tense situations.”

Throughout this exchange, Artemis stood still as a statue, aware that should he release the tremors,

they would engulf him perhaps forever, and he would be lost.

What has happened? he wondered. Am I not Artemis Fowl?

Then he noticed something.

That ship has four engines. Four.

Death.

As if to confirm this thought, or indeed prompted by the thought, an orange bolt of energy appeared at the very tip of the descending craft, roiling nastily, looking very much like a bringer of death.

“Orange energy,” noted Holly, shooting it with a finger gun. “You’re the explainer guy, Foaly, explain that.”

“Worry not, lesser intellect,” said Foaly, fingers a blur across his keyboard. “This ship is unarmed. It’s a scientific probe, for gods’ sake. That plasma bolt is an ice cutter, no more than that.”

Artemis could hold in the tremors no longer, and they wracked his slim frame.

“Four engines,” he said, teeth chattering. “F-f-four is death.”

Vinyáya paused on her way to the shuttle gangway. She turned, a sheaf of steel hair escaping her hood. “Death? What’s he talking about?”

Before Holly could answer, the orange plasma beam bubbled merrily for a moment, then blasted directly into the shuttle’s engine.

“No, no, no,” said Foaly, speaking as one would to an errant student. “That’s not right at all.”

They watched horrified as the shuttle collapsed in a ball of turgid heat, rendering the metal shell transparent for just long enough to reveal the writhing marines inside.

Holly dropped low and dived toward Vinyáya, who was searching for a pathway through the flames to her men inside.

“Commander!”

Holly Short was fast, actually getting a grip on Vinyáya’s glove before one of the shuttle’s engines exploded and sent Holly pinwheeling through the superheated air onto the roof of the Great Skua restaurant. She flapped on the slate like a butterfly on a pin, staring stupidly at the glove in her hand. Her visor’s recognition software had locked onto Commander Vinyáya’s face, and a warning icon flashed gently.

Fatal injury to central nervous system, read a text on her screen. Holly knew that the computer was saying the same thing in her ear, but she couldn’t hear it. *Please seal off the area and call emergency services.*

Fatal injury? This couldn’t be happening again. In that nanosecond she flashed back to her former commander Julius Root’s death. Reality returned in a fiery heatwave, turning the ice to steam and popping the heat sensors in her suit.

Holly dug her fingers into the roof slush and hauled her upper body higher. The scene played around her like a silent movie, as her helmet noise filters had expanded and ruptured in the nanosecond between the flash and the bang.

Everyone in the shuttle was gone . . . that much was clear.

Don’t say gone, say dead—that’s what they are.

“Focus!” she said aloud, pounding a fist into the roof to emphasize each syllable. There would be time to grieve later; this crisis was not yet past.

Who is not dead?

She was not dead. Bleeding but alive, smoke drifting from the soles of her boots.

Vinyáya. Oh gods.

Forget Vinyáya for now.

And in a snowdrift underneath the eaves, she spotted Foaly's legs doing an inverted gallop.

Is that funny now? Should I be laughing?

But where was Artemis? Suddenly Holly's heartbeat was loud in her ears, and her blood roared like the surf.

Artemis.

Holly's journey to a crouch was harder than it was supposed to be, and no sooner had her knees found purchase than her elbows gave way, and she ended up almost back where she'd started.

Artemis. Where are you?

Then from the corner of her eye, Holly saw her friend loping across the ice. Artemis was apparently unharmed, apart from a slight drag in his left leg. He was moving slowly but determinedly away from the burning shuttle. Away from the crank and blackening of contracting metal and the mercury drip of stealth ore finally reaching its melting point.

Where are you going?

Not running away, that was for sure. If anything, Artemis was moving directly into the path of the still-falling space probe.

Holly tried to scream a warning. She opened her mouth but could only cough smoke. She tasted smoke and battle.

"Artemis," she managed to hack after several attempts.

Artemis glanced up at her. "I know," he shouted, a ragged edge to his voice. "The sky appears to be falling, but it isn't. None of this is real, the ship, those soldiers, none of it. I realize that now. I've been . . . I've been having delusions, you see."

"Get clear, Artemis," cried Holly, her voice not her own, feeling like her brain was sending signals to someone else's mouth. "That ship is real. It will crush you."

"No it won't, you'll see." Artemis was actually smiling benignly. "Delusional disorder, that's all this craft is. I simply constructed this vision from an old memory, one of Foaly's blueprints I sneaked a look at. I need to face my dementia. Once I can prove to myself that this is all in my head, then I can keep it there."

Holly crawled across the roof, feeling her insides buzz as magic went to work on her organs. Strength was returning, but slowly, and her legs felt like lead pipes. "Listen to me, Artemis. Trust me."

"No," Artemis barked. "I don't trust any of you. Not Butler, not even my own mother." Artemis hunched his shoulders. "I don't know what to believe, or who to trust. But I do know that there cannot be a space probe crash-landing here at this precise moment. The odds against it are just too astronomical. My mind is playing tricks on me, and I have to show it who's boss."

Holly registered about half of that speech, but she'd heard enough to realize that Artemis was referring to his own mind in the third person, which was a warning sign no matter which head doctor's theories you subscribed to.

The spaceship continued to bear down on them, unaffected by Artemis's lack of belief in its existence, shunting shock waves before it. For a memory, it certainly seemed very real, each panel richly textured by the tribulations of space travel. Long jagged striations were etched into the nose cone like scars from lightning bolts, and buckshot dents peppered the fuselage. A ragged semicircular chunk was missing from one of the three fins, as though a deep-space creature had taken a bite from

the passing craft, and strangely colored lichen was crayoned in the square patch vacated by a hull plate.

Even Artemis had to admit it. “That doesn’t seem particularly ethereal. I must have a more vivid imagination than I had thought.”

Two of the ship’s silencers blew out in rapid succession, and engine roar filled the bowl of gray sky.

Artemis pointed a rigid finger at the craft. “You are not real!” he shouted, though even he did not hear the words. The ship was low enough now for Artemis to read the message written in several scripts and pictograms across the nose cone.

“I come in peace,” he mumbled, and thought: Four words. Death.

Holly was thinking too, images of tragedy and destruction flashing past like the lights of a train carriage, but there was one other notion holding steady through the chaos.

I can’t reach him from this rooftop. Artemis is going to die, and there’s nothing I can do but watch.

And then a hysterical afterthought.

Butler is going to kill me.

THE JADE PRINCESS AND CRAZY BEAR

Cancún, Mexico; The Night Before

The man in the rental Fiat 500 swore loudly as his broad foot mashed the tiny brake and accelerator pedals, stalling the tiny car for the umpteenth time. It might be a little easier to drive this miniature vehicle if I could sit in the backseat so my knees were not jammed under my chin, the man reasoned. And with that thought he pulled over sharply onto the verge bordering Cancún's spectacular lagoon. In the reflected light of a million twinkling luxury-suite balcony lamps, he performed an act of vandalism on the Fiat that would definitely cost him his deposit and possibly send him rocketing to number one on the Hertz blacklist.

"Better," grunted the man, and tossed the driver's seat down the verge.

Hertz only has itself to blame, he thought, on a reasoning roll. This is what happens when you insist on giving a toy car to a man of my proportions. It's like trying to load fifty-caliber rounds into a Derringer boot gun. Ridiculous.

He crammed himself into the vehicle and, navigating from the backseat, pulled into the flow of cars, which even at close to midnight were packed together tighter than train carriages.

I'm coming, Juliet, he thought, squeezing the steering wheel as though it were a threat to his little sister somehow. I'm on my way.

The driver of this carelessly remodeled Fiat was of course Butler, Artemis Fowl's bodyguard, though he had not always been known by that name. In the course of his career as a soldier of fortune, Butler had adopted many a nom de guerre to protect his family from recriminations. A band of Somali pirates knew him as Gentleman George, he had for a time hired himself out in Saudi Arabia under the name Captain Steele (Artemis had later accused him of having a touch of the screeching melodramas), and for two years a Peruvian tribe, the Isconahua, knew the mysterious giant who protected their village from an aggressive logging corporation only as El Fantasma de la Selva, the ghost of the jungle. Of course, since becoming Artemis Fowl's bodyguard, there was no more time for side projects.

Butler had traveled to Mexico at Artemis's insistence, though insistence had hardly been necessary once Butler had read the message on his principal's smartphone. They had been in the middle of a mixed martial-arts session earlier in the day when the phone rang. A polyphonic version of Morricone's "Miserere," which signified the arrival of a message.

"No phones in the dojo, Artemis," Butler had rumbled. "You know the rules."

Artemis had delivered one more blow to the hand pad, a left jab that had little power and less accuracy, but at least his shots were landing on the pad now. Until recently, Artemis's punches were so wide of the mark that in the event of actual combat a passerby would be in more danger than any assailant.

"I know the rules, Butler," said Artemis, taking several breaths to get the sentence out. "The phone is definitely off. I checked it five times."

Butler pulled off a pad, which in theory protected the wearer's hand from punches, but in this case protected Artemis's knuckles from Butler's spadelike palm. "The phone is off, and yet it rings."

Artemis trapped a glove between his knees and tugged his hand free. "It's set to emergency breakthrough. It would be irresponsible of me not to check it."

"Your speech seems strange," noted Butler. "Stilted somehow . . . Are you *counting* your words?"

"That is patently ridiculous . . . actually," said Artemis, coloring. "I am simply choosing carefully." He hurried to the phone, which was one of his own design with a dedicated operating platform based on an amalgamation of human and fairy technology. "The message is from Juliet," he said, consulting the three-inch touch screen.

Butler's pique immediately evaporated. "Juliet sending an emergency message? What does it say?"

Artemis wordlessly handed over the phone, which seemed to shrink as Butler's massive hand enfolded it.

The message was short and urgent. Five words only.

In trouble, Domovoi. Come alone.

Butler's fingers squeezed the phone until its casing cracked. The first names of all Blue Diamond bodyguards were closely guarded secrets, and the mere fact that Juliet had invoked his name to summon him was an indicator of how much trouble she was in.

"Naturally I'm coming with you," said Artemis briskly. "My phone can trace that call to the nearest square centimeter and we can be anywhere in the world in just less than a day."

Butler's features belied the struggle between big brother and detached professional that raged inside him.

Finally the professional got the upper hand. "No, Artemis. I cannot put you in harm's way."

"But . . ."

"No. I must go, but you will return to school. If Juliet is in trouble, I need to move quickly, and caring for you will simply double my responsibility. Juliet knows how seriously I take my job, and she would never ask me to come alone unless the situation was dangerous."

Artemis coughed. "It's probably not too dangerous. Perhaps Juliet is more *inconvenienced* than in any actual peril. But in any case you should go as soon as . . ."

He plucked the phone from Butler's grasp and tapped the screen.

"Cancún, Mexico, that's your destination."

Butler nodded. It made sense. Juliet was currently with a Mexican wrestling troupe, building a rep for her character, the Jade Princess, and praying for that magic call from the World Wrestling Entertainment group.

"Cancún," he repeated. "I've never been. There's not much call for people like me there. Too safe."

"The jet is at your disposal, naturally," said Artemis, who then frowned, unhappy with the sentence. "Hopefully this entire thing is nothing but a . . . goose chase."

Butler glanced sharply at his young charge. Something was wrong with the boy, he felt sure of it, but at the moment there was only room for Juliet in the *concern for others* corner of his brain.

"This is no goose chase," he said softly, then with considerably more force: "And whoever caused this message to be sent will regret it." To drive this point home, Butler allowed his big-brother side to surface for a moment and punched a training mannequin so hard that its wooden head flew off and spun on the practice mat like a top.

Artemis picked up the head and tapped the crown half a dozen times, or thereabouts.

"I imagine they already do," he said, his voice the rustle of dry leaves.

So now Butler was making agonizingly slow progress through the late-night Cancún traffic, head and shoulders squashed flat against the Fiat's roof. He had neglected to reserve a car, and so had been forced to accept whatever the Hertz lady had left in the lot. A Fiat 500. *Très* cool if you were a single teen on the way to the spa, but not so suitable for a two-hundred-twenty-pound hulk.

An unarmed two-hundred-twenty-pound hulk, Butler realized. Generally the bodyguard managed to bring a few weapons with him to whatever party he was about to break up, but in this case public transport was actually quicker than the Fowl jet, so Butler had been forced to leave his arsenal at home, even his beloved Sig Sauer, which had almost drawn a tear. He had connected through Atlanta, and the marines at customs would not have taken kindly to anyone smuggling hardware into the U.S., especially someone who looked like he could probably breach the White House with a few belts of ammunition.

Butler had been at something of a loose end since leaving Artemis's side. For more than fifteen years he had spent the vast bulk of his time engaged in Artemis-related activities. Finding himself virtually alone in business class on a transatlantic flight with several hours of enforced downtime, he could not sleep for worrying about his sister, and so his mind naturally drifted to Artemis.

His charge had changed recently—there was no doubt about it. Since his return from saving endangered species in Morocco last year, there had been a definite mood swing. Artemis seemed less open than usual, and *usually* he was about as open as a Swiss vault at night. Also, Butler had noticed that Artemis seemed obsessed with the placement of objects, something Butler himself was very alert to, as he was trained to see everything in a building as a potential weapon or shrapnel fragment. Often Artemis would enter a room that his bodyguard had already swept and cleared and start moving things back to where they had been. And Artemis's speech seemed *off* somehow. Artemis generally spoke in sentences that were almost poetic, but lately he seemed to care less about what he said than how many words it took to say it.

As the Boeing began its descent into Atlanta, Butler decided that he would go to Artemis Senior as soon as he made it back to Fowl Manor and make a clean breast of his concerns. While it was undeniably his job to protect Artemis from danger, it was difficult to do that when the danger came from Artemis himself.

I have protected Artemis from trolls, goblins, demons, dwarf gas, and even humans, but I cannot guarantee that my skill set will save him from his own mind. Which makes it imperative that I find Juliet and bring her home as soon as possible.

Butler eventually grew tired of the traffic's crawl down Cancún's main strip and decided that he would make better time on foot. He pulled over sharply into a taxi lane and, ignoring the indignant cries of the drivers, set off past the rows of five-star hotels at a brisk jog.

Locating Juliet would not be difficult: her face was splashed all over dozens of downtown banners. LUCHASLAM! FOR ONE WEEK ONLY AT THE GRAND THEATER.

Butler did not much care for Juliet's picture on the banners. The artist had twisted her pretty face to make his sister seem more aggressive, and her stance was obviously just for show. It might look good on a poster, but it was all wrong, and left her wide open for a hook to the kidneys.

Juliet would never approach an adversary in that way.

His sister was the best natural fighter he had ever seen, and too proud to ask for help unless there was no other option available to her, which was why her message was so worrying.

Butler jogged two miles without breaking a sweat, weaving through throngs of revelers, until he arrived at the glass-and-stucco façade of the Grand Theater. A dozen or so red-jacketed doormen

clustered around the automatic doors, nodding and smiling at the crowd hurrying in for the main event.

Around the back, he decided. The story of my life.

Butler skirted the building, thinking that it would be nice, just once, to go in the front door. Maybe he would in another lifetime, when he got too old for this business.

How old do I have to be? he wondered. Come to think of it, with all the time travel and fairy healings, I'm not even sure how old I actually am anymore.

As soon as Butler reached the back door, he put all other thoughts from his mind, apart from the job at hand. Get to Juliet, find out what trouble she was in, and extricate her with minimal collateral damage. There were still ten minutes before the show was scheduled to start, so with a little luck he could nab his sister before the room got too crowded.

The only security on the back door was a single surveillance camera. Luckily, the Grand was a straight theater and not the convention room of a resort hotel, or there would have been a cluster of pools at the back door, along with crowds of tourists, a salsa band, and possibly half a dozen undercover private cops. As it was, Butler slid unnoticed into the theater and simply waved at the camera on the way in, effectively covering his face.

Butler did not meet a shred of opposition on his way through the theater's backstage area. He passed a couple of costumed wrestlers sharing an electrolytic drink, but they barely spared him a glance, probably assuming he was one of them. Big and dumb, by the look of him—the bad guy.

Like most theaters, the Grand had miles of corridors and back passages that had not shown up on the blueprints Butler had downloaded on his smartphone from Artemis's interpedia, which had a dedicated blueprint site containing any plans that had ever been uploaded and quite a few that Artemis had stolen and uploaded himself. After several wrong turns, even Butler's excellent sense of direction was failing him, and the big bodyguard was tempted to simply punch through walls and create the shortest route to where he wanted to go: the performers' dressing room.

Butler finally arrived at the dressing room door just in time to see the tail end of the wrestling squad winding their way through to the stage, looking like sections of a Chinese dragon in all their Lycra and silk. After the last wrestler slipped through, a barrier of meat and muscle in the shape of two enormous bouncers closed across the backstage doors.

I could take them, thought Butler. That would not be a problem, but it would only leave me seconds to find Juliet and get her out of here, and, knowing my sister, she will want to conduct a complicated and ultimately meaningless conversation before she's ready to go. I need to think like Artemis, like the Artemis of old, and play this calmly. Blundering in is likely to get both of us killed.

Butler heard the howls and whoops of the crowd as the wrestlers entered. The noise was muffled through the double doors, but clearer from the dressing room. He poked his head inside and saw a monitor bracketed to the wall, displaying the action in the ring. Convenient.

Butler stepped close to the screen and searched for his sister. There she was, at the corner of the ring, performing some ostentatious warm-ups that were more for show than actual effect. If Butler could have seen his own normally taciturn features at that moment, he would have been surprised by the fond, almost sleepy, smile that lingered on his face.

It's been too long since I've seen you, little sister.

Juliet did not seem to be in any immediate danger; in fact, she appeared to be relishing the crowd's attention, raising her arms for more applause and whipping the jade ring on her ponytail around in figures of eight. The crowd loved her too. Several young men waved banners bearing Juliet's image, and a few were bold enough to shower her with confetti hearts. Butler frowned. He would definitely be

keeping an eye on those particular young gentlemen.

Butler allowed himself to relax a little, a loosening of the fingers, which perhaps five people in the world would have noticed. He was still on high alert, but could admit to himself now that his darkest fear had always been that he would arrive too late.

Juliet is alive. And healthy. Whatever the problem is, we can solve it between us.

He decided then that the most prudent course of action would be to observe from this vantage point. He had a clear view of the wrestling ring, and, if necessary, he could be by his sister's side in seconds.

The opening match was started by an old-fashioned ringside bell, and Juliet leaped high, landing catlike on the top rope.

"Princesa! Princesa!" chanted the audience.

A favorite with the crowd, thought Butler. Of course she is.

Juliet's opponent was obviously the villain of the piece. A humongous woman with buzz-cut bleached hair and a costume of bloodred Lycra.

"Boo!" called the crowd.

Like most wrestlers on the *luchador* circuit, the huge newcomer wore a mask that covered her eyes and nose and was tied at the back with some nasty-looking barbed wire, which Butler suspected was actually plastic.

Juliet seemed like a doll in comparison, apparently outmatched. A little of the cockiness drained from her masked face, and she appealed to her corner for assistance, but was met with shrugged shoulders from a stereotypical flat-capped trainer who could have been recruited from the set of a wrestling movie. This match is all scripted, Butler realized. There's no danger here.

He pulled a chair up to the screen and settled to watch his sister.

The first round was gentle enough on Butler's nerves. Then, in the second round, Juliet strayed a little close to her opponent and was pounced on with surprising speed.

"Oooh," cried most of the crowd. *"Snap her in two, Samsonetta!"* called a few less charitable observers.

Samsonetta, thought Butler. It suits her.

He was not worried at this point. There were at least a dozen ways for Juliet to break Samsonetta's hold, as far as he could see. Most she could do without even using her hands. One would be theoretically possible by combining a fake sneeze with a sudden drop.

Butler started to worry when he noticed a dozen men in trench coats sidling along the far wall toward the ring.

Trench coats? In Cancún? Why would anyone wear a trench coat in Mexico unless they were concealing something?

The picture was too grainy for Butler to garner much detail, but there was something about these guys and the way they moved. Purposeful, devious, sticking to the shadows.

I've got time, Butler reasoned, already putting together his plan. This could be nothing, but it could be everything. I can't take chances with Juliet's life at stake.

He glanced around the dressing room to see if there was anything he could use as a weapon. No such luck. All he could find were a couple of chairs, plenty of glitter and mascara, and a barrel of old costumes.

I won't be needing the glitter or mascara, thought Butler, reaching into the costume barrel.

Juliet Butler was feeling a little claustrophobic in the arms of her opponent.

“Come on, Sam,” she hissed. “You’re suffocating me.”

Samsonetta stamped flat-footed on the canvas, sending hollow booms bouncing around the auditorium, while at the same time making a show of squeezing Juliet’s neck.

“That’s the idea, Jules,” she whispered, her Stockholm accent stretching the vowels. “I whip up the crowd, remember? And then you take me down.”

Juliet turned her face to the three-thousand-strong crowd, delivering a dramatic howl of pain.

“Kill her!” screamed the nice ones.

“Kill her and then snap her in two!” screamed the not-so-nice ones.

“Kill her, snap her in two, and stamp on the pieces!” howled the downright nasty audience members, usually easily identifiable by the violent slogans on their T-shirts, and the drooling.

“Careful, Sam. You’re moving my mask.”

“And such a pretty mask too.”

Juliet’s entire outfit was pretty enough to make her a crowd favorite. A jade skintight leotard, and a small eye mask, which was actually a gel-pack covered with glitter.

If I have to wear a mask, Juliet had reasoned, it might as well be good for my skin.

They prepared for Samsonetta’s trademark takedown: an overhead drop, helped along by the power of her amazing arms. Usually if her opponents had so much as a spark of energy left in them after that maneuver, Sam simply fell on them, and that generally did the trick. But since Juliet was the crowd’s favorite, the move was not planned to go as usual. A wrestling audience liked to see their hero as far down as possible without being out.

Sam advertised the move by asking the crowd if they wanted the body slam.

“Do you want it?” she shouted, playing up her accent.

“Yes!” they howled, beating the air with their fists.

“The body slam?”

“Slam!” they chanted. “Slam! Slam!”

A few chanted other rougher slogans, but security soon zoned in on them.

“You want a slam! I will slam!” Generally Samsonetta would have said *I shall slam!* But Max, the promoter/ manager of LuchaSlam, liked her to use ‘v’ instead of ‘w’ wherever possible, as for some reason it drove the crowd crazy.

And so she bent backward and hurled the unfortunate Jade Princess toward the deck, and that would have been the end of it had not the Jade Princess somehow twirled in midair to land on her toes and fingertips, and that wasn’t even the impressive part. The impressive part was springing back up again and whipping her head around so the jade ring woven into her blond ponytail whacked Samsonetta in the jaw, landing the giantess flat on her back.

Samsonetta whined and complained, rubbed her jaw to redden it, and rolled like a walrus on a hot rock.

She was quite a performer, and for a moment Juliet worried that the jade ring had really hurt her, but then Sam threw her a secret wink, and she knew that they were still playacting.

“Have you had enough, Samsonetta?” asked Juliet, springing nimbly to the top rope. “Would you like some more?”

“No,” blubbed her supposed opponent, then decided to sneak another ‘v’ in for Max. “I want no more.”

Juliet turned to the audience. “Should I give her some more?”

Oh no, said an imaginary audience. *No more, that would be barbaric.*

But the real audience said things like:

“Kill her!”

“Take her downtown!” (Whatever that meant—they were already downtown.)

“Show her the pain!” The pain being obviously more excruciating than just plain old pain.

I love these people, thought Juliet, and launched herself off the top rope for the coup de grâce.

It would have been a thing of beauty. A lovely double flip rounded off with a nice *ooof*-inducing elbow to the stomach, but someone came out of the shadows and snatched Juliet from the air, tossing her roughly into the corner of the ring. Several other silent, muscled attackers piled on top of Juliet until all that was visible of the girl was one green-clad leg.

In the shadows, where he was watching behind one of the lighting rigs, Butler felt a sour ball of fear drop to the pit of his stomach, and muttered: “That’s my cue.”

Which sounded an awful lot more flippant than he felt.

The crowd was still applauding the unexpected arrival of the Ninja Squad *luchadores* in their trademark black costumes disguised by trench coats, who had doubtless shown up to avenge their master’s recent defeat at the hands and feet of the Jade Princess at QuadroSlam in Mexico City. Surprise guests often showed up unadvertised at the slams, but the entire Ninja Squad was an unexpected bonus.

The ninjas were a writhing mass of pumping limbs, each member desperate to land a blow on the Jade Princess, and there was nothing the slight girl could do but lie there and absorb it.

Butler entered the ring quietly. The element of surprise was often the difference between victory and defeat in against-the-odds situations, though if Butler were honest with himself he would admit that secretly he usually felt that the odds were in his favor, even in this case, where he was outnumbered twelve to one. Twelve to two if Juliet were still conscious, which was six to one, which was virtually even-stevens. A moment earlier Butler had felt a little self-conscious in the borrowed costume of fake bearskin leotard and mask, but now all embarrassment was forgotten as he clicked his brain into that cold space he called combat mode.

These people are hurting my sister, he thought as a hot trickle of anger cracked his icy shell of professionalism.

Time to go to work.

With a growl that was totally in keeping with his Crazy Bear costume, Butler rolled into the ring under the bottom rope, stepped briskly across the canvas, and began laying into the ninjas with blatant economy of movement. There was no threatening monologue, not even a simple foot stamp to herald his arrival, which was hardly courteous. He simply dismantled the ninjas as though they were a Jenga stack.

There followed thirty seconds of flailing limbs and high-pitched screaming that would have done hysterical teenagers at a boy-band concert proud, and then, finally, Juliet was uncovered.

Butler saw that his sister was intact, and smiled behind the mask.

“Hello there. I made it.”

And in response to her life being saved, Juliet jammed four rigid fingers into his solar plexus, driving the air from his body.

“Aarrk,” he grunted; then, “Whuuueeeech.” Which was supposed to be *What are you doing?*

A couple of the ninjas had recovered and tried a few of their stylized moves on their attacker, only

to be rewarded with casual openhanded slaps.

“Watch it,” snapped Butler, drawing breath once more and shooting the ninjas the evil eye. “I need a minute of family time.”

Something flickered in the corner of Butler’s vision, moving with blurred, jittery speed. His left hand automatically shot out to grab the jade ring that was braided into his sister’s blond ponytail.

“Wow,” said Juliet. “No one’s ever done that before.”

“Really?” said Butler, dropping the jade ring. “No one?”

Juliet’s eyes widened behind her mask. “No one except . . . Brother, is that you?”

Before Butler could reply, Juliet sidestepped and pole-axed with her forearm a ninja who may have been sneaking up on them, or may in fact have been trying to escape from what had become the ring of real pain as opposed to the ring of convincingly faked agony.

“Didn’t you guys hear this man? We need family time!” The ninjas shrank back against the rope, whimpering.

Even Samsonetta seemed a little concerned.

“Brother, I’m in the middle of a grudge match. What are you doing here?” asked Juliet.

It might have taken many people a few more minutes before they realized something was amiss, but not Butler. Years of protecting Artemis Fowl had taught him to catch the penny before it dropped.

“Obviously you didn’t send for me. We need to leave so I can figure things out.”

Juliet’s bottom lip hung sulkily, transporting Butler ten years into the past, when he’d forbidden her to shave her head.

“I can’t just go. I’ve got fans expecting me to do cartwheels and give you the signature move.”

It was true. The Jade Princess’s camp was bouncing on their benches, baying for Crazy Bear’s blood.

“If I just leave, there could be a riot.”

Butler glanced up at the giant screen suspended from the ceiling and saw a close-up of his own head looking up at the screen, which was enough to give anyone a headache.

A voice boomed from four old-fashioned conical speakers wired to the corners of the overhead screen.

“Who is this guy, folks? Is it Crazy Bear come to take down his old enemy, the Jade Princess?”

Juliet stuck out her chin. “Max. Always looking for the angle.”

“Juliet, we don’t have time for this.”

“Whoever it is,” continued Max, “we’re not just going to let him walk out of here with our princess, are we, amigos?”

Judging by the loud and sustained reaction, the paying customers did not take to the idea of Crazy Bear simply walking out with the princess. The language was florid, and Butler could have sworn that the walls were shaking slightly.

Butler took three quick steps to the side of the ring and wagged his finger at a little man holding a microphone.

He was surprised when the little man jumped up on the table, stamped on his own hat, then shouted into the mike.

“You’re threatening me, Crazy Bear? After all I’ve done for you? When those forest rangers found you living with the grizzlies, who took you in? Max Schetlin, that’s who. And this is how you repay me?”

Butler tuned out the rant. “Okay, Juliet. We need to get out of here now. We do not have time for this.”

Someone wanted me out of the way. Possibly someone who has a grudge against Artemis.”

“You need to be an awful lot more specific than that, brother. Artemis has more enemies than you, and you have quite a few at the moment.”

It was true. The crowd was turning ugly—a lot of it was fake ugly, but Butler’s keen eye spotted scores of wrestling fans in the front rows who looked ready to storm the ring.

I need to make a statement, he thought. Show these people who’s boss.

“Outside the ring, Jules. Right now.”

Juliet did what she was told without complaint. Butler had that look on his face. The last time she had seen *that* look, her brother had punched his way through the hull of a Somali pirate’s stolen yacht, sinking the vessel in the Gulf of Aden.

“Don’t hurt Samsonetta,” she ordered. “We’re friends.”

Butler shook his head in disapproval. “Friends? I knew you two were faking.”

Samsonetta and the ninjas were busy throwing shapes in the far corner of the ring. They stamped, punched, and threatened without actually attacking.

When Juliet was safely outside the ropes, Butler turned to his own corner and threw his shoulder into the pad covering the post. The impact rattled the post in its housing.

“Crazy Bear really is crazy,” crowed Max. “He’s beating up the ring. Are you going to stand for that, ninjas? This man is defiling the very symbol of our sporting heritage.”

Apparently the Ninja Squad was prepared to accept a little defiling of their symbol if it meant not being attacked by the man mountain who had taken their pyramid apart with no more effort than a child knocking down a house of cards.

Butler hit the post again, this time smashing it right out of its socket. He hefted the metal pole, stepped underneath the ropes, and began to twist the ring in on itself.

This move was so unprecedented that it was several seconds before anyone could appreciate what they were seeing. In years to come the maneuver would become known as *the wringer* and would elevate the real Crazy Bear, who was passed out drunk in the back alley, to the status of *luchador* superstar.

Even Max Schetlin’s tirade dried up as his brain tried to process what was actually going on.

Butler took advantage of the stunned stillness to quickly spin the corner post half a dozen times, popping another two supports from their housings.

This is not as difficult as it looks, mused Butler, catching sight of himself on the giant screen. This entire ring is little more than an inverted tent. A well-fed teenager could pull it down.

He gathered the three posts in his arms, twirling them deftly, drawing the ring tighter and tighter.

A couple of the ninjas had enough presence of mind to skip out while they could, but most stood slack-jawed, and a couple who believed themselves to be dreaming sat down and closed their eyes.

Butler nodded at Samsonetta. “Out you go, miss.”

Samsonetta actually curtsied, which was totally out of character, and ducked under the rope, along with one ninja who was sharp enough to recognize a reprieve when he saw one. The rest of the crew was pressed closer together as Butler wound the rope tight. Every twist brought groans from the coils of old rope and from the people trapped inside. The crowd was beginning to realize what was happening, and they began to cheer with every twist. Several were gleefully calling for Butler to squeeze the air from the ninjas’ lungs, but the bodyguard was content merely to crush them together

like passengers on the London Tube at rush hour. And once they were powerless to move, he shuffled them to the side of the ring and planted the pole back in its housing.

“I’m going now,” he said. “And I advise you all to stay put until I am out of the country, at the very least, because if you don’t, I will be very unhappy.”

Butler did not have the magical power of the *mesmer*, but his voice was extremely persuasive nevertheless.

“Okay, Bear, take it easy,” said the only ninja sporting a white head scarf, possibly the leader. “You’re straying way off script. Max is going to go nuts.”

“You let me worry about Max,” Butler advised. “You worry about me worrying about you.”

The ninja’s frown was obvious through the folds of his scarf. “What? Who should I worry about?”

Butler ground his teeth. Dialoguing was not as easy as the movies would have a person believe.

“Just don’t move until I’m gone. Got it?”

“Yep. You should have said that.”

“I know.”

From a bodyguard’s perspective, there were so many things wrong with this situation that Butler almost despaired. He turned to his sister.

“Enough of this. I have to go somewhere and think. Somewhere with no Lycra.”

“Okay, Dom. Follow me.”

Butler stepped down from the platform. “If you could stop bandying my name about. It’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Not from me. I’m your sister.”

“That may be. But there are thousands of people here, and half as many cameras.”

“It’s not as if I said the whole name. It’s not as if I said Dom-o—”

“Don’t!” warned Butler. “I mean it.”

The stage door was a mere twenty yards away, and the familiar rhythms of family bickering warmed Butler’s heart.

I think we’re going to make it, he thought in a rare moment of optimism.

Which was when the picture on the big screen was replaced by a giant pair of glowing red eyes. And although red eyes are usually associated with nasty things like vampires, chlorine burn, and conjunctivitis, these particular red eyes seemed friendly and infinitely trustworthy. In fact, anyone who gazed into the fluid swirling depths of these eyes felt that all their problems were about to be solved, if they just did what the owner of those eyes told them to do.

Butler inadvertently caught sight of the eyes in his peripheral vision but quickly tucked his head low.

Fairy magic, he realized. This entire crowd is about to be *mesmerized*.

“Look into my eyes,” said a voice from every speaker in the room. The voice even managed to invade the cameras and phones of the audience.

“Wow,” said Juliet in a monotone that did not suit the word. “I really need to look into those eyes.”

Juliet might have been reluctant to do what the silky voice commanded if she’d had any memory of her dealings with the Fairy People. Unfortunately, those memories had been wiped from her mind.

“Block the exits,” urged the voice. “Block all the exits. Use your bodies.”

Juliet whipped off her mask, which was impeding her view of the screen. “Brother, we need to

block the exits with our bodies.”

Butler wondered how things could get much worse as hundreds of enraptured wrestling fans surged down the aisles to physically block the entrances and exits.

Block the exits with your bodies? This fairy is pretty specific.

Butler had no doubt that another command was forthcoming, and he doubted it would be *Now join hands and sing sea shanties*. No, he was certain that nothing benign would issue from that screen.

“Now kill the bear and the princess,” said the layered voice, a few of the layers taking a moment to catch up, lending a sibilant sssss to *princess. Kill the bear and the princess. Charming.*

Butler noticed a glint of dark intent in his sister’s eyes as she realized that he was the bear. What would she do, he wondered, when she tumbled to the fact that *she* was the princess?

It doesn’t matter, he realized. We could both be dead long before that happens.

“Kill the bear and the princess,” droned Juliet in perfect unison with the *mesmerized* crowd.

“And take your time about it,” continued the magical voice, now infused with a merry note. “Drag it out a little. As you humans say: no pain no gain.”

A comedian, thought Butler. It’s not Opal Koboi, then.

“Gotta kill you, brother,” said Juliet. “I’m sorry. Truly.”

Not likely, thought Butler. On a good day, if he was drugged and blindfolded, maybe Juliet could have inflicted a little damage, but in his experience the *mesmer* made people slow and stupid. A large part of their brains were switched off, and the parts left awake were not going to be winning any Nobel prizes.

Juliet tried a spinning kick but ended up twirling off balance and into Butler’s arms. Annoyingly, her jade ring spun around and clattered him on the ear. *Even mesmerized, my sister is irritating.*

Butler hefted Juliet easily, then tensed his muscles for flight.

“Kill you,” muttered his sister. “Sorry. Gotta.” Then: “Fairies? You kidding me?”

Was she remembering the Fowl Manor siege? Butler wondered. Had the *mesmer* accidentally triggered recall?

He could investigate later, if there were a later for them. Butler had considerable faith in his own ability, but he doubted that he could take on a theater full of zombies, even if they weren’t fleet of foot.

“Go to work, my human lackeys,” said the voice that went along with the red eyes. “Dig deep into the darkest recesses of your brains, such as they are. Leave no evidence for the authorities.”

Leave no evidence? What are they supposed to do with the evidence?

That question really didn’t bear thinking about.

Bear? Ha-ha-ha, thought Butler, and then: Jokes? I have time for jokes? Is it possible that I am frazzled? Pull it together, man. You’ve been through worse.

Although, looking at the dozens of stiff-limbed instapsychos lumbering down from the upper levels, Butler could not for the life of him remember when.

A pudgy forty-something man sporting an Undertaker T-shirt and a beer hat pointed at Butler from the aisle.

“Beaaaaar!” he yowled. “Beaaaaar and princess!”

Butler borrowed a word from the fairy lexicon.

“D’Arvit,” he said.

CHAPTER 3
ORION RISING

Vatnajökull, Iceland; Now

Artemis was jumping between psychoses.

“Not real!” he shouted at the descending ship. “You are nothing but a delusion, my friend.”

And from there he hopped straight over into paranoia. “You planned this,” he shouted at Holly. “Who were your partners? Foaly without doubt. Butler? Did you turn my faithful bodyguard against me? Did you burgle his mind and plant your own truths in there?”

From the rooftop, the directional mike in Holly’s helmet picked up no more than every second word, but it was enough to tell her that Artemis was not the clinical logistician he used to be.

If the old Artemis could see the new Artemis, the old Artemis would die of embarrassment.

Like Butler, Holly was having a hard time controlling her rebellious sense of humor in this dire hour.

“Get down!” she called. “The ship is real!”

“That’s what you want me to think. That ship is nothing more than a cog in your conspiracy. . . .” Artemis paused. If the ship was a cog in the conspiracy, and the conspiracy was real, then the ship must be real. “Five!” he blurted suddenly, having forgotten all about it for a minute. “Five ten fifteen.”

He pointed all of his fingers at the ship, wiggling them furiously.

A ten-finger salute. Surely that will vaporize this vision.

And it seemed as though the fingers were having an effect. The four discus-shaped engines, which had been trailing behind the main body like helpless puppies tethered to their spooked master, suddenly flipped and began emitting anti-grav pulses that lolloped toward the ground in fat bubbles, slowing the ship’s descent faster than seemed possible for a craft of such inelegant dimensions.

“Hah!” crowed Artemis. “I control my own reality. Did you see that?”

Holly knew that, far from controlling anything, Artemis was actually witnessing a fairy probe’s landing sequence. She had never actually piloted a deep-space probe herself, but nevertheless knew that standing underneath such a behemoth while it was dropping anti-grav bubbles was more than enough to get a person killed, and wiggling fingers like a sideshow magician was not going to change that.

I have to get up, she thought.

But the injury in her legs held her down like a lead blanket.

I think my pelvis is broken, she realized. Maybe an ankle too.

Holly’s magic had an unusual potency, thanks to a couple of boosts from her friend the demon N^o1 (who was turning out to be the most magical warlock the university had ever enrolled). The magic was setting to work on her injuries, but not fast enough. Artemis had a couple of seconds before one of those anti-grav blobs tore him apart or the ship itself actually landed on his head. And you didn’t have to be a genius to figure out what would happen then, which was just as well, as Artemis didn’t seem to be a genius anymore.

“Assistance,” she called weakly into her com set. “Someone. Anyone?”

There was no one. Anyone who had been inside the shuttle was beyond magic, and Foaly was still

upended in the snowdrift.

Even if there were somebody, it's too late.

Large crack patterns bloomed in the ice like hammer blows as the anti-grav pulses impacted on the surface. The cracks spread across the glacier with a noise like snapping branches, dropping large sinkholes through to the subterranean caverns below.

The ship was as big as a grain silo and seemed to be fighting against the pull of its tethered engines, throwing off waves of steam and jets of fluid. Rocket fuel drenched Artemis, making it difficult to ignore the fact that the rocket was real. But if there was one thing Artemis had not lost it was his stubbornness, and so he stood his ground, refusing to yield to his final squeak of good sense.

“Who cares?” he muttered.

Holly somehow heard the last two words and thought,
I care. Desperate situations call for desperate solutions.

Nothing to lose, thought Holly, flapping at the holster on her thigh.

She swept her pistol from its home in a slightly more erratic arc than usual. The gun was synced with her visor, but even so, Holly did not have time to check the settings. She simply held down the command sensor with her thumb, then spoke clearly into the microphone at the side of her mouth.

“Gun.” [Pause for beep.] “Non lethal. Wide-bore concussive.”

“Sorry, Artemis,” she muttered, then fired a good three-second blast at her human friend.

Artemis was ankle deep in slush and in full-rant mode when Holly pulled the trigger.

The beam hit him like a slap from a giant electric eel.

His body was lifted and tossed through the air a moment before the probe clattered to a bone-crushing landing, obliterating the spot where he had been standing.

Artemis dropped into a crater like a sack of kindling and disappeared from Holly's sightline. That's not good, thought Holly, then saw her own magical sparks hover before her eyes like inquisitive amber-tailed fireflies.

Shutdown, she realized. My magic is sending me to sleep so that I can heal.

From the corner of her eye, Holly saw a door open in the probe's belly and a gangplank swing down on hydraulics. Something was coming out.

Hope I get to wake up, Holly thought. I hate the ice and I don't want to die cold.

Then she closed her eyes and did not feel her limp body roll from the rooftop and thump into a snowdrift below.

Barely a minute later, Holly's eyes fluttered open. Waking up felt jagged and unreal, like documentary footage from a war zone. Holly could not remember standing, but suddenly she was on her feet, being dragged along by Foaly, who looked extremely disheveled, possibly because his beautiful quiff had been totally singed and sat balanced on top of his head like a bird's nest. But mostly he seemed depressed.

“Come on, Captain!” Foaly shouted, his voice seeming a little out of sync with his mouth. “We need to move.” Holly coughed amber sparks, and her eyes watered.

Amber magic now? I'm getting old.

Foaly shook her shoulders. “Straighten up, Captain. We have work to do.”

The centaur was using trauma psychology. Holly knew this: she could remember the in-service course in Police Plaza.

In the event of battle stress, appeal to the soldiers' professionalism. Remind them of their rank

repeatedly. Insist that they perform their duty. This will not have a long-term healing effect on any psychological wounds, but it might be enough to get you back to base.

Commander Vinyaya had given that course.

Holly tried to pull herself together. Her legs felt brittle from the knees down, and her midsection buzzed from the post-healing pain known as magic burn.

“Is Artemis alive?”

“Don’t know,” said Foaly brusquely. “I built those things, you know. I *designed* them.”

“What things?”

Foaly dragged her to a glassy droop in the glacier, slicker than any ice rink.

“The things hunting us right now. The amorphobots. The things that came out of the probe.”

They slid to the bottom of the bank, leaning forward to keep their balance.

Holly seemed to have developed tunnel vision, though her visor was panoramic. The edges of her vision crackled with amber static.

I am still healing. I shouldn’t be moving. Gods know what damage I will do myself.

Foaly seemed to read her mind, but more likely it was fairy empathy.

“I had to get you out of there. One of my amorphobots was heading your way, sucking up everything in its path. The probe’s gone below, to gods know where. Try to lean on me.”

Holly nodded, then coughed again; the spray was instantly absorbed by her porous visor.

They hobbled across the ice toward the crater where Artemis lay. He was extremely pale and there was a speed drip of blood running from the corner of his mouth to his hairline. Foaly dropped to his forelegs and tried to encourage Artemis back into consciousness with a stiff talking to.

“Come on, Mud Boy,” he said, poking Artemis’s forearm. “No time for lollygagging.”

Artemis’s response to this chastising was a barely noticeable jerking of his arm. This was good—at least it told Holly that Artemis was still alive.

Holly tripped over the crater’s lip, and stumbled to the bottom.

“*Lollygagging?*” she gasped. “Is that even a word?”

Foaly poked Artemis one more time. “Yes. It is. And shouldn’t you be killing those robots with your pencil?”

Holly’s eyes seemed to light up. “Really? Can I do that?”

Foaly snorted. “Certainly. If your pencil has a super-duper demon magic beam inside it instead of graphite.”

Holly was still groggy, but even through a fugue of injury and battle stress, it was obvious that the situation was dire. They heard strange metallic clicks and animalistic whoops chittering through the air, softly at first then rising in tempo and intensity to a frenzy.

The noise grated against Holly’s forehead as though her skin were being yanked.

“What is that?”

“The amorphobots are communicating,” whispered Foaly. “Transferring terabytes of information wirelessly. Updating each other. What one knows, they all know.”

Holly scanned Artemis’s vitals through her visor. The glowing readouts informed her that he had a slight heart murmur and there was some unusual brain activity in the parietal lobe. Other than that, the best thing her helmet computer could conclude about Artemis was that he was basically not dead. If she could survive this latest misadventure, maybe Artemis would too.

“What are they looking for, Foaly?”

“What are they looking for?” repeated the centaur, smiling that particular hysterical smile that exposed too much gum.

Holly suddenly felt her senses snap into focus and knew that the magic had finished its overhaul of her injuries. Her pelvis still throbbed and probably would for a few months, but she was operational again, so maybe she could lead them back to fairy civilization.

“Foaly, pull yourself together. We need to know what those things can do.”

The centaur seemed put out that someone would choose this particular moment to ask him questions when he had so many vital issues to consider.

“Holly, really! Do we have time for explanations now?”

“Snap out of it, Foaly! Information, hand it over.”

Foaly sighed, lips flapping. “They are biospheres. Amorphobots. Dumb plasma-based machines. They collect samples of plant life and analyze them in their plasma. Simple as that. Harmless.”

“Harmless,” blurted Holly. “I think someone has reprogrammed your amorphobots, centaur.”

The blood disappeared from Foaly’s cheeks and his fingers twitched. “No. Not possible. That probe is supposed to be on its way to Mars to search for microorganisms.”

“I think we can be pretty sure that your probe has been hijacked.”

“There is another possibility,” suggested Foaly. “I could be dreaming all of this.”

Holly pressed on with her questions. “How do we stop them, Foaly?”

It was impossible to miss the fear that flickered across Foaly’s face, like a sun flash across a lake. “Stop them? The amorphobots are built to withstand prolonged exposure to open space. You could drop one of these onto the surface of a star and it would survive for long enough to transmit some information back to its mother probe. Obviously I have a kill code, but I suspect that has been overridden.”

“There must be a way. Can’t we shoot them?”

“Absolutely not. They love energy. It feeds their cells. If you shoot them, they’ll just get bigger and more powerful.”

Holly laid a palm on Artemis’s forehead, checking his temperature.

I wish you would wake up, she thought. We could really use one of your brilliant schemes right now.

“Foaly,” she said urgently. “What are the amorphobots doing right now? What are they looking for?”

“Life,” replied Foaly simply. “They’re doing a grid search now, starting at the drop site and moving out. Any life forms they encounter will be absorbed into the sac, analyzed, then released.”

Holly peeped over the lip of the crater. “What are their scan criteria?”

“Thermal is the default. But they can use anything.”

Thermal, thought Holly. Heat signatures. That’s why they are spending so much time by the flaming shuttle.

The amorphobots were arranged on corners of invisible grid squares, slowly working their way outward from the shuttle’s smoking carcass. They seemed innocuous enough, rolling balls of gel with twin glowing red sensors at their cores. Like slime balloons from a children’s party.

Maybe the size of a crunchball.

They couldn’t be all that dangerous surely. Dozy little blebers.

Her opinion altered sharply when one of the amorphobots changed color from translucent green to angry electric blue and the color spread to the others. Their eerie chittering became a constant shrill

whine.

They have found something, Holly realized.

The entire squad of twenty or so bots converged on a single spot, some merging so that they formed larger blobs, which flowed across the ice with a speed and grace heretofore concealed. The bot that had flashed the message to the others allowed a charge to crackle across its skin, which it then discharged into a hillock of snow. An unfortunate snow fox leaped from the steam, tail smoking like a fuse, and made a dart for freedom.

It's almost comical. Almost.

The amorphobots jiggled as though laughing and sent a few bolts of crackling blue energy after the doomed fox, carving black rents in the ground, steering the terror-stricken mammal away from the shelter of the Great Skua. In spite of the fox's natural speed and agility, the bots anticipated its movements with incredible accuracy, sending the animal running in circles, its eyes rolling, tongue dangling.

There was only one possible conclusion to this game of cat and mouse. The largest amorphobot droned an impatient bass command through the almost invisible gel speakers in its body and turned abruptly to continue its search. The others followed, leaving only the original bot to hunt the fox. It quickly tired of the sport and nailed the fox in mid-jump with a bolt of power, cast like a spear from its midsection.

Murderer, thought Holly, more angry than horrified. Foaly didn't design this.

Foaly suddenly moved in front of her. "You've got that look in your eyes, Captain."

"What look?"

"The one Julius Root always talked about. The I'm-about-to-do-something-incredibly-stupid look."

There was no time for debate. "I need to get to Artemis's project."

"You can't go. What does the LEP manual suggest in these kinds of situations?"

Holly ground her teeth. Her two geniuses were useless; she would have to do this herself.

"The manual, which you helped to write, would advise me to retreat to a safe distance and construct a bivouac, but, with respect, those guidelines are a pile of troll weevils."

"Wow. Nice respect. Do you know what the word *respect* actually means? I'm no book professor, but I'm pretty sure comparing my manual to a steaming pile of troll weevils does not constitute respect."

"I never said steaming," said Holly, then decided that time was short and she could apologize later. "Listen, Foaly. I don't have a downlink to Police Plaza. There are murdering blobby robots on our trail, and the only people who might be able to come up with a solution are either fast asleep dreaming or, in your case, wide awake dreaming. So I need you to cover me while I make a run for Artemis's crate. Do you think you can do that?"

Holly handed the centaur her backup weapon. Foaly held the gun gingerly, as though it were radioactive, which to a certain degree it was.

"Okay. I know how this thing works, in theory."

"Good," said Holly, and slithered on her belly up and onto the ice field before she could change her mind.

Holly felt her torso numb and stiffen as she slid across the glacier. The ice stretched in front of her, carved by the prevailing wind into elegant swoops and whorls, a wind that was to her rear, making

progress relatively easy considering she had until recently been suffering from several broken bones.

Saved by magic once more.

But now she had not a spark left in her.

The fox's carcass lay smoking on a bed of snow, melting a grave for itself.

Holly tore her gaze from the pathetic mammal's eyes, still rolled back in its blackened head, and looked instead at Artemis's crate, which stood disregarded by the bots, but past their search line.

I need to breach the line unnoticed. Their default sensor is heat. I'll give them a little heat to think about.

Holly switched on the air-conditioning in her suit, which had about five minutes left in it according to her visor readout, then selected the flare package on her Neutrino handgun. She also accidentally activated the tunes player in her helmet with a series of shivery winks. Luckily, the volume was muted and she managed to switch off Grazen McTortoor's metal epic "Troll Sundown" before the amorphobots detected the vibration.

Grazen McTortoor's music never killed anyone before. He'd probably be thrilled.

Holly flipped onto her back, looking up at a sky of pitch and granite, the bowed cloud bellies licked by flame.

Heat.

Holly steadied her hand and removed the detachable trigger finger section of her glove. She pointed her weapon skyward and sent a wide-arc'd spray of flares into the air.

Flares. If only someone could see them and come to help.

The amorphobots' relaxed chittering amped up to a whine, and Holly realized that it was time to move.

She was up on her feet and running before her good sense had time to kick in. She raced full pelt for Artemis's crate, taking as straight a tack as possible, weapon held along her sightline.

I don't care what Foaly says. If one of those red-eyed monsters comes anywhere near me, I'm going to find out what a plasma grenade does to its innards.

The bots had without exception pointed their sensors toward the descending flares, which fizzled like the sputterings of an oxyacetylene torch cutting through the clouds. The amorphobots' malleable bodies sprouted gel periscopes and they stood, following the flares' progress like ill-defined meerkats. They may have noticed an inconsistent heat source jiggling across the glacier, but they were programmed to prioritize.

Not so smart after all.

Holly ran as fast as her brittle bones would carry her.

The terrain was flat but treacherous. The light September snow had dusted the grooves, and Holly almost lost her footing in a tractor trail. Her ankle grated but did not crack. Lucky.

Lucky little elf

Sat on the shelf

And the silly human boy

Mistook her for a toy

A nursery rhyme used to teach children to sit still if they saw a human.

Think like a little tree and that's what the Mud Men will see.

I'm a tree, thought Holly, without much conviction. A little tree.

So far, so good: the bots were glued to the flares and were showing no interest in her heat signature. She skirted the wreckage of the shuttle, trying not to hear the groan of the chassis or notice the front panel of a flight suit melded with the windscreen. Beyond the shuttle lay Artemis's great experiment. An oversized refrigerator cannon.

Great. More ice.

Holly knelt at the base of what Artemis had called his Ice Cube and quickly located the control panel, which luckily had an omnisensor, so it was a simple matter to sync it with her own helmet. Now the refrigerator cannon would fire when she wanted, and at whatever target she chose. She set a timer running and set herself running seconds afterward, straight back the way she had come.

It occurred to her that the flares were lasting well, and she really should congratulate Foaly on the new models, at which point they inevitably began to wink out.

With no more pretty lights in the sky, the amorphobots returned to their methodical searching of the site for signs of life. One was dispatched to check the erratic blob of heat crossing their grid. It rolled across the surface, scanning the ground as it went, sending out gel tendrils to scoop up debris and even whipping out a tongue like a bullfrog's to snag a low-flying black-headed gull. If there had been a sound track to its movements it would have been *tum-ti-tum-ti-tum*. Business as usual, no worries. Then its vector crossed Holly's, and they virtually collided. The bot's scanner eyes flashed, and lightning bolts jittered inside its globulous body.

All I need is a few seconds, thought Holly, and blasted the bot with a narrow beam right in its gut.

The beam sliced through the center of the blobby body, but was diffused before reaching the hardware nerve center at the core. The bot bounced backward like a kicked ball, whining as it did so, updating its friends.

Holly did not slow down to see what the response might be; she did not need to—her keen elfin hearing gave her all the information she needed: they were coming for her. They were all coming. Their semisolid forms pummeled the ice as they moved like quick bongo rolls, along with that dreadful chittering.

A bot in her path skittered to one side, a temporary Neutrino hole drilled in its top quadrant. Apparently Foaly was taking his job as cover provider seriously, even though he knew his weapon could not kill these things.

Thanks, Mr. Consultant.

The bots were converging on her now, trundling from all sides, burping and squeaking as they came.

Like kiddie-cartoon characters.

Which did not stop Holly from blasting as many of the cute critters as she could. She vaguely heard Foaly shouting at her to kindly only shoot when necessary, or to quote him verbatim:

Holly. In the name of all the gods, stop shooting energy into all-energy beings. Just how stupid are you?

The bots quivered and meshed, growing larger and more aggressive.

“D’Arvit,” huffed Holly, her breath coming hard now. Her helmet informed her cheerily that her heart rate was over 240 bpm, which would be fine for a sprite but not for an elf. Normally a flat-out sprint would not inconvenience Holly, nor indeed any fairy who had passed the LEP physical, but this was a desperate dash immediately after a major healing. She should be in a hospital sipping rejuvenation sludge through a straw.

“Two minutes to cardiac arrest,” said her helmet breezily. “Ceasing all physical activity would be a really great idea.”

Holly spared a nanosecond to despise the voice of her helmet. Corporal Frond, the glamorous face of the LEP, all blond hair and tight jumpsuits, who'd recently had her bloodline traced back to Frond the Elfin King, now insisted on referring to herself as Princess.

Foaly emerged from the crater and grabbed his friend's elbow. "Come on, Holly. We have seconds of life left before those critters that you led right to our hidey-hole kill us all like rodents."

Holly ran as fast as she could, bones creaking. "I have a plan."

They stumbled over the frozen glacier, back to the depression where Artemis Fowl lay unconscious. The amorphobots flowed after them like marbles rolling down the side of a bowl.

Foaly dived into the hole. It was not elegant—centaurs do not make good divers, which is why they do not compete in pool events.

"Whatever your idea was, it's not working," he cried.

Holly also dived into the depression, covering Artemis as well as she could.

"Put your face in the ice," she ordered. "And hold your breath."

Foaly ignored her, his attention attracted by Artemis's Ice Cube, which was swiveling on its base.

"It seems that Artemis's cannon is about to fire," he said, his scientific interest piqued in spite of the horrible death approaching them.

Holly grabbed the centaur's mane, roughly dragging him to the ground. "Face down, hold breath. How hard is that?"

"Oh," said Foaly. "I see."

There must have been a buildup of heat somewhere, because the bots froze for a moment, exchanging curious chitters. The noise was quickly drowned out by a bass heavy thump followed by a descending whistle.

"Ooooh," chorused the amorphobots, sprouting gel periscopes.

Foaly closed one eye and cocked his ear. "Mortar," he proclaimed, and then as the whistling grew louder he decided that it might be a good idea to take a breath and cover as many orifices as possible.

This is really going to hurt, he thought, and for some reason giggled like a four-year-old pixette.

Then the entire indent was submerged in a pancake of densely packed nano-wafers that worked into every crack, coating the occupants of the hole and completely obliterating any heat signatures.

The amorphobots jiggled backward, away from the mystery substance, searched around for the beings they had been pursuing, and then shrugged their blobby shoulders and trundled after their mother ship, which had bludgeoned and melted its way through the surface to the subterranean volcanoes below.

Underneath the gunky quagmire, two fairies and one human lay still, blowing bubbles with their breath.

"It worked," gasped Holly finally.

"Shut your face," snapped Foaly.

Holly pulled his head free from the goo strings. "What did you say to me?"

"Don't take it personally," said Foaly. "I just felt like being rude to someone. Do you have any idea what it's going to be like getting this stuff out of my mane? Cabelline will shave me for sure."

"Save you?"

"Shave me. What are you, deaf?"

"No. My ears are clogged with stuff."

Holly flip-flopped herself and Artemis from the indent, using her glove-sensor to check the

human's vitals.

Still alive.

She tilted his head back to make sure the airway was clear.

Come back to us, Artemis. We need you.

The amorphobots had gone, and the only signs that they had ever been on the Vatnajökull glacier were the grooves in the ice and snow that marked their passage. The air was blessedly chitter free, though maybe a little chattering would have distracted from the crackle of still-burning troop shuttle.

Holly separated from Artemis with a noise like a very big Band-Aid being slowly pulled from a weeping wound.

What a disaster, she thought, the weight of her coated helmet causing her head to droop. What a total catastrophe.

Holly looked around, trying to make some kind of assessment of the situation. Commander Vinyáya was gone, along with the military. An LEP Martian probe had been hijacked by forces unknown and seemed to be heading into Earth's crust. The probe was blocking their link to Haven, and it was only a matter of time before humans came to investigate all the flares and explosions. And she had no magic left to shield herself.

"Come on, Artemis," she said, desperation creeping into her voice. "We're in deeper trouble than ever before. Come on, you love this kind of impossible problem. I'm sorry I shot you."

Holly tugged off a glove and held her fingers high, inspecting them just in case a spark remained.

Nothing. No magic. Perhaps it was just as well. The mind was a delicate instrument, and Artemis's dabblings with the fairy arts had probably triggered his Atlantis Complex in the first place. If Artemis wanted to get well, he would have to do it the old-fashioned way, with pills and electroshock. I already gave him his first shock, thought Holly, swallowing a guilty chuckle.

Artemis shifted on the ice, trying to blink under a faceful of sloppy nano-wafers.

"Unhhh," he moaned. "Ayyy ga breee."

"Wait," said Holly, scooping handfuls of gunk away from his nostrils and mouth. "Let me help."

Artemis's own inventions dribbled from the corners of his mouth. There was something different about his eyes. They were the same colors as usual, but softer somehow.

You're dreaming.

"Artemis?" she said, half expecting a typical snappy retort, as in, *Of course it's Artemis. Who were you expecting?* But instead he simply said:

"Hello."

Which was fine, and Holly was happy enough, until he followed it with:

"And who might you be?"

Ooooh, D'Arvit.

Holly tugged off her helmet. "It's me, Holly."

Artemis smiled in delight. "Of course, yes. Artemis thinks about you all the time. It's embarrassing that I didn't recognize you. First time up close."

"Uh . . . Artemis thinks about me. But *you* don't?"

"Oh yes, I do constantly, and may I say you look even more bewitching in the flesh."

Holly felt a feeling of foreboding creep over her like the shadow of a summer storm cloud.

"So, we haven't met before?"

"Not met, per se," replied the human youth. "I have of course been aware of you. Seen you from

afar, submerged as I was by Artemis's personality. Thank you for releasing me, by the way. I had been making inroads in the host consciousness for some time now, since Artemis developed his little number obsession, but that jolt from your weapon was just the thing to give me the boost I needed. It was your weapon, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," said Holly absently. "And you're welcome.

I think." A sudden idea cut through her confusion. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

The boy did a quick digit check. "Four."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"No. To me a number is a number. Four is no more a harbinger of death than any other whole number. Fractions, though, they're freakish."

The youth smiled at his own joke. A smile of such simple saintly goodness that it would have made Artemis retch.

Holly was drawn into the psychosis and had to ask, "So if you're not Artemis Fowl, then who are you?"

The boy extended a dripping hand straight up. "My name is Orion. I am so pleased to meet you at last. I am, of course, your servant."

Holly shook the proffered hand, thinking that manners were lovely, but she really needed someone cunning and ruthless right now, and this kid didn't appear to be very cunning.

"That's great, em . . . Orion. Really. We're in a bind here, and I can use all the help I can get."

"Excellent," said the boy. "I have been taking stock of the situation from the rear seat, as it were, and I suggest that we retire to a safe distance and construct some form of bivouac."

Holly groaned. Of all the times for Artemis to go AWOL inside his own head.

Foaly clambered from the morass of nano-wafers, using his fingers to draw aside curtains of gunk that obscured his vision.

"I see Artemis has woken up. Good. We could do with one of his trademark apparently-ridiculous-but-actually-ingenious plans."

"Bivouac," said the boy in Artemis Fowl's head. "I suggest a bivouac, and perhaps we could gather kindling for a campfire, and some leaves to make a cushion for the lovely lady."

"Kindling? Did Artemis Fowl just use the word *kindling*? And who's the lovely lady?"

The wind picked up suddenly, lifting loose surface snow and sending it skittering across the ice. Holly felt flakes settle on her exposed neck, sending a prickling chill trickling down her spine.

Things are bad now, she realized. And they're about to get worse. Where are you, Butler? Why aren't you here?

FLOYD'S STAG NIGHT

Cancún, Mexico; The Night Before

Butler had an excuse for not being in Iceland that would hold up in any court of law and possibly even on a note for teacher. In fact, he had a number of excuses.

One: his employer and friend had sent him away on a rescue mission that had turned out to be a trap. Two: his sister had been in fake trouble, whereas now she was in very real trouble. And three: he was being chased around a theater in Mexico by a few thousand wrestling fans, who at this moment looked very much like zombies, without the rotting limbs.

Butler had read in the entertainment section of his in-flight magazine that vampires *had* been all the rage, but this year zombies were in.

They're certainly in here, thought Butler. Far too many of them.

Strictly speaking, *zombies* wasn't an accurate description of the mass of mindless humans milling about in the theater. They were of course *mesmerized*, which is not the same thing at all. The generally accepted definition of a zombie is: a reanimated corpse with a taste for human brains. The *mesmerized* wrestling fans were not dead and had no desire to sniff anyone's brains, never mind take a bite out of them. They were converging on the aisle from all sides, cutting off any possible escape routes, and Butler was forced to back up over the collapsed ring and onto the wrestling platform. This retreat would not have made the top one hundred on his list of preferred options, but at this stage, any action that granted a few more heartbeats was preferable to standing still and accepting one's fate.

Butler slapped his sister's thigh, which was easy, as she was still slung over his shoulder.

"Hey," she complained. "What was that for?"

"Just checking your state of mind."

"I'm me, okay? Something happened in my brain. I remember Holly and all the other fairies."

Total recall, Butler surmised. Her encounter with the fairy *mesmerist* had watered the seed of memory in his sister's mind, and it had sprawled in there, bringing everything back. It was possible, he supposed, that the strength of this mental chain reaction had obliterated the attempted *mesmerization*.

"Can you fight?" Juliet swung her legs high, then flipped into a fighting stance.

"I can fight better than you, old-timer."

Butler winced. Sometimes having a sister two decades younger than oneself meant putting up with a lot of ageist comments.

"My insides are not as old as my outsides, if you must know. Those Fairy People you are just now remembering gave me an overhaul. They took fifteen years off, and I have a Kevlar chest. So I can look after myself, and you, if need be."

As they bantered, the siblings automatically swiveled so they were back to back and covering each other. Butler talked to let his sister know that he was hopeful they could escape from this. Juliet responded to show her big brother that she was not afraid so long as they stood side by side. Neither of these unspoken messages was true, exactly, but they gave a modicum of comfort.

The *mesmerized* wrestling fans were having a little trouble negotiating the wrestling platform, and their packed bodies clogged the ringside like sticks in a dam. When one did manage to climb up,

Butler tossed him or her back out as gently as possible. Juliet was not so gentle on her first toss, and Butler definitely heard something snap.

“Easy, sister. These are innocent people. Their brains have been hijacked.”

“Oops, sorry,” said Juliet, not sounding in the least penitent, and rammed the heel of her hand into the solar plexus of someone who was probably a soccer mom when not *mesmerized*.

Butler sighed. “Like this,” he said patiently. “Watch. You pick them up and just slide them out over the top of their friends. Minimum impact.” He performed the move a few times just to give Juliet the idea.

Juliet jettisoned a drooling teenager. “Better?”

“Much.” Butler jerked a thumb at the screen overhead. “That fairy has *mesmerized* everyone who looked into his eyes and heard his voice. It’s not their fault they’re attacking us.”

Juliet almost looked upward, but stopped herself in time. On screen, the red eyes still burned, and over the speaker system that soft hypnotic voice flowed through the crowd like warm honey, telling them everything would be all right if they could just kill the princess and the bear. If they could perform that one simple act, all their dreams would come true. The voice affected the Butlers, made their sense of purpose a little mushy, but without eye contact it could not control their actions.

More of the crowd was making it onto the stage now, and it was only a matter of seconds before the platform collapsed.

“We need to shut that guy up,” shouted Butler over the rising hubbub of *mesmerized* moaning. “Can you reach the screen?”

Juliet squinted, measuring the distance. “I can reach the gantry if you give me a little height.”

Butler patted one of his broad shoulders. “Climb aboard, little sister.”

“Just a sec,” said Juliet, dispatching a bearded cowboy with a roundhouse kick. She climbed up Butler’s frame with the agility of a monkey and stood on his shoulders. “Okay, boost me.”

Butler grunted a grunt that any family member could interpret as *Hold on a moment*, and with Juliet balanced overhead, he punched one of the support wrestlers in the windpipe, and swept another’s legs from under him.

Those two were twins, he realized. And dressed as Tasmanian devils. This is the strangest fight I have ever been in, and I’ve tangled with trolls.

“Here we go,” he said to Juliet, sidestepping a man in a hot-dog costume. Butler wiggled his fingers under her toes.

“Can you lift me?” asked his sister, keeping her balance with the ease of an Olympic gymnast, which Juliet might have been if she could have woken up in time for the early morning training sessions.

“Of course I can lift you,” snapped Butler, who might have been an Olympic weightlifter if he hadn’t been battling goblins in an underground laboratory when the last trials were on.

He sucked in a breath through his nose, tightened his core, and then with a burst of explosive power and a growl that would not have sounded out of place in a Tarzan movie, he thrust his baby sister straight up toward the twenty-foot-tall metal gantry supporting the screen and a pair of conical speakers.

There was no time to check if Juliet had made it, as the zombies had formed a body ramp, and the wrestling fans of Cancún were pouring onto the stage, all determined to kill Butler slowly and painfully.

Right now would have been a prudent time to have activated the jet pack he often wore underneath

his jacket, but in the absence of a jet pack, and his jacket, Butler thought it might be an idea to increase the aggression of his defense, enough to buy himself and Juliet a few more seconds.

He stepped forward to meet the throng, using an adapted form of tai chi to tumble the front row back into the crowd, building a mountain of bodies the *mesmerized* fans would have to climb over. Which worked fine for about half a minute until half of the stage collapsed, allowing the unconscious bodies to roll off and form an effective ramp for the wrestling fans to climb. The injured fans seemed not to feel any pain and climbed instantly to their feet, often walking on twisted and swollen ankles.

The drones flowed onto the stage with only one desire in their hijacked minds.

Kill Crazy Bear.

It's hopeless, thought Butler, for the first time in his life. Utterly hopeless.

He didn't go down easy, but go down he did under the sheer weight of bodies flowing over him. His face was smushed by back fat, and he felt teeth close around his ankle. Punches were thrown, but they were badly aimed and weak.

I am going to be crushed to death, Butler realized. Not beaten.

This realization didn't make him feel any better. What did make him feel better was the fact that Juliet should be safe on the gantry.

Butler fell back, like Gulliver dragged down by the lilliputians. He could smell popcorn and beer, deodorant and sweat. His chest was pressed and tight, breath came hard. Someone wrestled with one of his boots for some reason, and suddenly he could not move. He was a prisoner under the sheer weight of bodies.

Artemis is alone. Juliet will know to take my place as his bodyguard.

Lack of oxygen turned the world black, and it was as much as Butler could do to shove his arm through the mass of bodies smothering him, and wiggle his fingers good-bye to his sister.

Someone bit his thumb.

Then he disappeared utterly, and the fairy on the screen laughed.

Juliet hooked two fingers of her left hand around the bottom lip of a gantry beam and pressed down so hard that she could almost feel her fingerprints. For ninety-nine percent of the world's population, two fingers would simply not be enough to bear one's own bodyweight. Most mere mortals would need a strong two-handed grip to keep them up for no more than a minute, and there is a large percentage of people who couldn't hoist themselves aloft with anything short of a winch system and a couple of trained shire horses. But Juliet was a Butler and had been trained at Madame Ko's Personal Protection Agency, where there had been an entire semester devoted to body-weight vectors. In a pinch, Juliet could keep herself off the ground using only a single toe, so long as no passing mischief-maker decided to tickle her in the weak spot under her rib cage.

While it is one thing to hold oneself aloft, it is quite another to hoist oneself upward, but fortunately Madame Ko had put a few seminars into that too. That is not to say it was easy, and Juliet imagined her muscles screaming as she swung her other hand about for a better grip, then hauled herself on to the beam. On another day, she would have paused to allow her heart to slow down a little, but from the corner of her eye she saw her brother about to be engulfed by wrestling fans, and decided that this was not the day for leisurely recuperation.

Juliet popped to her feet and ran the length of the beam with the confidence of a gymnast. A good gymnast, that is, not one who slips painfully on the beam, which is exactly what happened to a *mesmerized* lighting technician who attempted to cut Juliet off before she could reach the screen.

Juliet winced. "Oooh. That looked sore, Arlene." Arlene did not comment, unless turning purple and tumbling flailing into space can be counted as commentary.

Juliet knew that she shouldn't have grinned when the technician's fall was comically broken by a cluster of men lumbering toward her brother, but she couldn't hold it in.

Her smile faded when she noticed the mass of bodies swarming along Butler's frame, burying him. Another technician approached her, this one a little smarter than his predecessor; he straddled the beam with his ankles locked below him. As he inched forward, he banged a large spanner on the beam, raising concussive bongs and spark flurries.

Juliet timed the arc of his swing, then planted a foot on his head and stepped over him as though he were a rock in the middle of a stream. She did not bother to topple the man from his perch. By the time he turned around, it would be too late for him to stop her, but he should have a nice bruise on his forehead to wonder about when his senses returned.

The screen was ahead, bracketed by metal tubing, and the red eyes glared at her out of the black background, seeming to emanate pure hate.

Or maybe this guy was up late partying.

"Stop where you are, Juliet Butler!" said the voice, and to Juliet it seemed as though the tones were suddenly those of Christian Varley Penrose, her instructor at the Madame Ko Agency. The only person, besides her brother, whom she had ever considered her physical equal.

"Some students make me proud," Christian would say in his BBC tones. "You just make me despair. What was that move?"

And Juliet would invariably answer. "It's something I made up, master."

"Made up? Made up? That is not good enough."

Juliet would pout and think, It was good enough for Bruce Lee.

And now Christian Varley Penrose seemed to have a line directly into her brain.

"Stop where you are!" the voice told her. "And, having stopped, feel free to lose your balance and plummet to the earth below."

The voice, Juliet felt, was taking hold of her determination and twisting it like a wet towel.

Don't look. Don't listen.

But she had looked and listened, if only for a second, and it was long enough for the insidious magic to snake a couple of tendrils into her brain. Her legs locked as though clamped with braces, and the paralysis spread upward.

"D'Arvit," said Juliet, though she wasn't quite sure why and, with her last spurt of self-control, pinwheeled her arms wildly, sending her entire body careening into the tubular frame supporting the screen and speakers.

The screen yielded elastically, and for a moment, the little bubble of Juliet's mind that she still held on to believed that the screen would not break; then her elbow, which Butler had told her as a child was sharp enough to open a tin of field rations, punched through the material, sending a jagged rent running down its length.

The fairy's red eyes rolled, and the last thing Juliet heard before her outstretched arm snagged the AV cables was an irritated snort, and then she was tumbling through a hole in the suddenly blank screen and falling toward the spasming mass of bodies below.

Juliet used the half-second before impact to curl herself into a ball.

Her very last thought before striking the crowd was: I hope zombies are soft.

They were not.

As soon as the fairy had flickered from the screen, the enthralled wrestling enthusiasts gradually

regained their senses.

Geri Niebalm, a retired beauty therapist from Seattle, found that she had somehow made it all the way from the rear of the hall to the stage itself without the aid of her walking frame. What was more, she had a phantom memory of vaulting over several youngsters in her pursuit of that pretty young wrestler with the stone in her ponytail. Two months later, Geri would undergo regression therapy at her friend Dora Del Mar's salon to bring that memory to the surface so that she could relish it at her leisure.

Stu "Cheeze" Toppin, a semiprofessional bowler from Las Vegas, woke up to find his mouth somehow stuffed with a foul-smelling nappy and the words kill bear kill written across his shirtfront in lipstick. This rather confused Stu, as his last memory was of the succulent hot dog he had been just about to bite into. Now, with the nappy aftertaste lingering on his tongue, Stu decided that he might just forget about the hot dog for the time being.

Though Stu had no way of knowing, the nappy in question belonged to little André Price, a baby from Portland who suddenly developed a speed and grace unheard of in eight-month-old limbs. Most victims of the *mesmer* move in a sluggish fashion, but André skipped over the heads of mob members and executed a perfect triple somersault from the ringside commentator's table, managing to sink his only tooth into Butler's thumb before the bodyguard was completely submerged. André Price began speaking a few months later—unfortunately it was in a language that his parents had no way of knowing was actually Gnommish. To their relief, he quickly picked up English too, though he never forgot his strange first language and found that he could sometimes make twigs burst into flame if he thought about it hard enough. A huge cacophonous moan almost lifted the roof from the theater as thousands of people realized they were not where they were supposed to be. Though there were miraculously no fatalities, by the time the last cut had been swabbed with antiseptic, there was a final count of 348 broken bones, more than 11,000 lacerations, and 89 cases of hysteria that had to be treated with sedatives, which, luckily for the patients, were a lot cheaper in Mexico than they would have been in the U.S.

And even though this was the age of amateur video, where most of those attending the event were in possession of at least one camera, there was not a single frame of evidence to prove that the mass *mesmerization* had ever taken place. In fact, when police flicked through the files on the confiscated cameras and phones, they found that every single instrument had been reset to factory conditions. No photos. In time, the Cancún Event, as it came to be known, would be mentioned in the same breath as Area 51 or the Yeti Migration.

Butler did not suffer from hysteria, possibly because he did not have enough air in his lungs for screaming, but probably because he had been in tighter spots (Butler had once shared a chimney in a Hindu temple with a tiger for several hours), but he had suffered over a dozen lacerations of his own, though he did not wait around long enough to have them added to the count.

As for Juliet, she was relatively unmarked in spite of her tumble. The moment she had recovered her breath, she began rolling bodies away from the spot where she had seen her brother submerged.

"Butler!" she called. "Brother! Are you under here?"

The top of her brother's head appeared, smooth as a lollipop. Juliet knew immediately that her brother was alive because of the vein pulsing at his temple.

There was a chubby seminaked infant wrapped around Butler's face and chewing on his thumb. Juliet dislodged the boy gently, noticing that he seemed very sweaty for a baby.

Butler drew a deep breath. "Thank you, sister. Not only did that child bite my thumb, but it tried to get a fist up one of my nostrils."

The baby gurgled happily, wiped its fingers in Juliet's ponytail, then crawled across the piles of humanity toward a crying lady who was waiting with open arms.

"I know you're supposed to like babies," said Juliet, huffing as she grabbed a banker type by his braces and sprung him from his perch on Butler's shoulders, "but that guy stank and he was a biter." She took a firm grip on a middle-aged lady whose blond hair had been sprayed till it shone like a buttercup. "Come on, missus. Get off my big brother."

"Oh," said the lady, eyelids fluttering as she tried to make sense of everything. "I was supposed to catch the bear. Or something like that. And I had popcorn, a large popcorn that I just paid for. Who's going to compensate me for that?"

Juliet rolled the lady across the bellies of four identically dressed cowboys who all wore floyd's stag night T-shirts under their rhinestoned waistcoats.

"This is ridiculous," she grunted. "I am a glamorous young lady. I can't be dealing with all this body odor and squidginess."

There was indeed a lot of body odor and squidginess about, much of it related to Floyd and his stag night, which smelled like it had been going on for about two weeks.

This was confirmed when the cowboy wearing a floyd badge awoke from his stupor with the words: "Dang. I stink worse than a dead skunk wearing a suit of bananer skins."

Bananer? thought Juliet.

Butler rolled his head, clearing space to breathe.

"We've been set up," he said. "Have you made any enemies down here?"

Juliet felt sudden tears plop over her bottom lids. She had been so worried. So worried. Big brothers can only be indestructible for so long.

"You big galoot," she said, sounding very Floyd-like. "For your information, I am fine. I saved you and everyone else."

Butler elbowed himself gently from between two *luchadores* dressed in garish Lycra and leather masks.

"Time for patting yourself on the back later, sister." He climbed from the tangle of limbs and stood tall in the center of the stage. "Do you see all of this?"

Juliet clambered along her brother's frame and stood lightly on his shoulders, and then to show off she stepped with easy balance onto his head. One foot only, the other tucked behind her knee.

Now that she had a second to appreciate the enormity of what had happened, it took her breath away. A sea of confusion spread out all around them, groaning and twisting. Blood ran, bones cracked, and tears flowed. It was a disaster area. People pawed at their mobile phones for comfort, and sprinklers sent down a fine mist that dusted Juliet's face.

"All this to kill us," she breathed.

Butler held out his massive palms, and, as she had done so many times in the Fowl dojo, Juliet stepped onto her brother's hands.

"Not just to kill us," he said. "Two bolts from a Neutrino could have done that. This was entertainment for someone."

Juliet somersaulted to the stage. "Entertainment for who?"

At the rear of the conference hall, a section of the stand collapsed, sending up a fresh round of shrieks and misery.

"I don't know," said the bodyguard grimly. "But whoever tried to kill us wanted Artemis unguarded. First I change into my own clothes, and then we find out who Artemis has annoyed this

time.”

ONWARD AND OUTWARD

The Deeps Maximum Security Prison, Atlantis; Now

Turnball Root took his entertainment wherever he could get it. Maximum security prisons didn't tend to be brimming with fun and flighty distractions. The guards were gruff and unobliging. The beds were unyielding and not enjoyable to bounce on, and the color scheme was simply ghastly. Olive green throughout. Disgusting. In surroundings like this, one had to enjoy every modicum of light relief that came one's way.

For months after his arrest by his brother, Commander Julius Root, and that naive, straight-arrow Holly Short, Turnball had simply fumed. He had actually spent weeks on end pacing his cell, bouncing his hatred off the walls. Sometimes he ranted, and occasionally he threw fits, smashing his furniture to smithereens. He realized eventually that the only person he was hurting with these displays was himself. This point had been driven home when he'd developed an ulcer, and because he had long since forfeited his magic through abuse and neglect, he had been forced to call in a medical warlock to put his organs right. The young whelp didn't seem much older than Turnball's prison uniform and had been extremely patronizing. Called him *grandpa*. Grandpa! Didn't they remember, these whelps? Who he was? What he had accomplished?

I am Turnball Root, he would have thundered, had the healing not totally sapped his strength. Captain Turnball Root, nemesis of the LEP. I stripped every ingot of gold from the First Pixie Prudential Bank. I was the one who rigged the Centenary Crunchball Final. How dare you refer to me as grandpa!

"Youngsters today, Leonor," muttered Turnball to his absent, beloved wife. "No respect."

Then he shuddered as he considered this statement.

"Ye gods, darling. I do sound old."

And using phrases like *ye gods* wasn't helping any.

Once he'd had enough of self-pity, Turnball had decided to make the best of the situation.

My chance will come eventually to be with you again, Leonor. Until then, why not make myself as comfortable as possible?

It hadn't been too difficult. After months of incarceration, Turnball had opened a dialogue with the warden, Tarpon Vinyáya, a malleable university graduate who had never washed blood from under his manicured nails, and had offered Tarpon tidbits of information to send to his sister Raine in the LEP in return for some harmless comforts. It hadn't bothered Turnball a whit to sell out his old underworld contacts, and for his trouble he was allowed to wear whatever he liked. He chose his old LEP dress uniform, complete with ruffled shirt and three-corner hat, but without insignias. Betraying two visa forgers working out of Cuba got him a computer limited to the prison network. And the address of a rogue dwarf operating as a house breaker in Los Angeles got him a simdown quilt for his plank of a bed. The warden would not be moved on the bed, however. Something for which his sister would one day pay the price.

Turnball had often passed many a happy hour thinking how he would one day kill the warden in revenge for this slight. But, truth be told, Turnball was not too concerned about the fate of Tarpon Vinyáya. He was far more interested in securing his own freedom, in looking deep into his wife's eyes once more. And to achieve these goals, Turnball would have to play the soft, doddering reprobate for a

while longer. He had been toadying up to the warden for more than six years now; what did a few more days matter?

Then I will be transformed into my true self, he thought, squeezing his fingers into tight fists. And this time, my baby brother won't be around to apprehend me, unless that young rascal Artemis Fowl has come up with a way to bring the dead back to life.

The door to Turnball's cell fizzled and dissolved as a nuclear-powered charge precipitated a phase change. In the doorway stood Mr. Vishby, Turnball's regular guard for the past four years and the one that he had finally managed to turn. Turnball did not like Vishby, in fact he detested all Atlantean elves with their fishlike heads, slobbering gills, and thick tongues, but Vishby had the seeds of discontent in his heart, and so had unknowingly become Turnball's slave. Turnball was prepared to tolerate anybody who could help him escape from this prison before it was too late.

Before I lose you, my darling.

"Ah, Mr. Vishby," he gushed, rising from his non-regulation office chair (three mackerel-smuggling sprites). "You're looking well. That gill rot is really clearing up."

Vishby's hand flew to the triple stripes below his tiny left ear.

"Do you think so, Turnball?" he gurgled, his voice thick and labored. "Leeta says she can't stand to look at me." know how Leeta feels, thought Turnball, and: There was a day when I would have had you flogged for addressing me by my first name. Captain Root, if you please. Instead of voicing these less than complimentary thoughts, he took Vishby by his slick elbow with barely a flinch of revulsion. "Leeta does not know how lucky she is," he said smoothly. "You, my friend, are a catch."

Vishby did not try to conceal his flinch. "A c-catch?"

Turnball drew a sharp, guilty breath. "Ah yes, excuse me, Vishby. Atlantean water elves do not like to think of themselves as catches, or being caught, for that matter. What I meant to say was that you are a fine specimen of an elf and any female in her right mind would consider herself fortunate indeed to have you as a mate."

"Thanks, Turnball," muttered Vishby, mollified. "How's it been going, then? The *plan*?"

Turnball squeezed the water elf's elbow to remind him that there were eyes and ears everywhere.

"Oh, my plan to construct a model of the *Nostremius* aquanaut? That plan? It's going rather well. Warden Tarpon Vinyáya is being most cooperative. We're negotiating over *glue*." He led Vishby to his computer screen. "Let me show you my latest blueprint, and can I say how much I appreciate your taking an interest? My rehabilitation depends on interaction with decent individuals like yourself."

"Uh . . . okay," said Vishby, uncertain whether or not he had just been complimented.

Turnball Root waved his hand in front of the screen, awakening a V-board on the desk (real wood: identity thieves, Nigeria).

"Here, look. I've solved the problem with the ballast tanks, see?"

Then with a smooth three-finger combination, he activated the scrambler that Vishby had smuggled in for him. The scrambler was an organic wafer, which had been grown in the Atlantis branch of the now defunct Kobo Labs. The scrambler was a reject lifted from the trash, which had merely needed a dab of silicon to get it operational.

There is so much waste in industry, Turnball had sighed to Vishby. *Is it any wonder we're in the middle of a resource crisis?*

The tiny scrambler was vital to Turnball because it made everything else possible. Without it he would have no link to the off-site computer; without it, the authorities here in the Deeps would be able to record every stroke of his keyboard and see exactly what he was really working on.

Turnball tapped the screen. It was split into two sections. One showed a recording from a few

hours ago: an arena packed with *mesmerized* humans crawling all over each other. The second a real-time bot's-eye view of a burning shuttle craft on an icy tundra.

“One tank is gone and the other is an indulgence, so I will outsource rather than waste any more time on it.”

“Good thinking,” said Vishby, who for the first time was beginning to understand that land dwellers' phrase *in over one's head*.

Turnball Root rested his chin on one hand in the fashion of an elderly actor posing for his headshot. “Yes, Mr. Vishby. Very soon now my *model* shall be complete. Already one of the major parts is on its way down here, and when that arrives, there won't be a fairy left in Atlantis . . . Eh, that is, there won't be a fairy left undazzled by my model.”

It was a feeble cover-up, he knew. Was *undazzled* even a word? But no need for panic, as nobody watched him anymore. They hadn't for years. He was no longer seen as a threat. The world in general had forgotten the disgraced Captain Turnball Root. Those who knew him now found it difficult to believe that this shabby old-timer could really be as dangerous as his file said he was.

It's Opal Koboi this, and Opal Koboi that, Turnball often thought bitterly. Well, we'll see who breaks out of this place first.

Turnball banished the screen with a click of his fingers. “Onward and outward, Vishby. Onward and outward.”

Vishby smiled suddenly, which with sea elves was accompanied by a slurping noise as they pulled their tongue back to make way for teeth. In fact, smiling was an unnatural expression for sea elves, and they only did it to let others know how they were feeling.

“Oh, good news, Turnball. I got my pilot's licence back finally after the Mulch Diggums escape.”

“Good for you, sir.”

Vishby had been one of Mulch Diggums's escorts when he escaped from the LEP. All sub-shuttle crew were required to hold a pilot's qualification, in case the primary pilot became incapacitated.

“Just for emergency trips. But in a year or two I'll be back in rotation.”

“Well, much as I know how you long to pilot a submarine again, let's hope there are no emergency evacuations, eh?”

Vishby approximated a wink, which was difficult, as he didn't have any eyelids and would have to give himself a spray soon to wash off the accumulated grit on his lower lid. His version of a wink was to tilt his head jauntily to one side.

“Emergency evacuations. No, we wouldn't want that.”

Eye grit, thought Turnball. Disgusting. And: This fish boy is about as subtle as a steamroller with a siren on top. I'd better change the subject in case someone does happen to glance at the security monitors. It would be just my luck.

“So, Mr. Vishby. No mail for me today, I assume?”

“Nope. No mail for the umpteenth day in a row.”

Turnball rubbed his hands in the manner of one with urgent business. “Well, then. I must not keep you from your duties, and I myself have some modeling to do. I impose a schedule on myself, you see, and that must be adhered to.”

“Right you are, Turnball,” said Vishby, who had long since forgotten that he should be the one doing the dismissing, not the other way around. “Just wanted to let you know I had my licence back. Because that was in *my* schedule.”

Turnball's smile never wavered, and he kept it bright by promising himself that he would dispose

of this fool the second he was no longer of any use.

“Good. Thanks for coming by.”

Vishby was almost fully through the hatch before he turned to drop another clanger.

“Here’s hoping we don’t have an emergency evacuation, eh, Captain Root?”

Turnball moaned internally.

Captain. Now he calls me Captain.

Vatnajökull; Now

The new guy, Orion Fowl, was checking his hosiery.

“No compression socks,” he declared. “I have been on several plane journeys over the past few weeks, yet Artemis never wears compression socks. And I know he is aware of deep-vein thrombosis; he simply chooses to ignore the risks.”

This was Orion’s second rant in as many minutes, the last one detailing Artemis’s use of nonhypoallergenic deodorant, and Holly was growing tired of listening.

“I could sedate you,” she said brightly, as if this were the most reasonable course of action. “We slap a pad on your neck and leave you at the restaurant for the humans. End of hosiery discussion.”

Orion smiled kindly. “You wouldn’t do that, Captain Short. I could freeze to death before help arrived. I am an innocent. Also, you have feelings for me.”

“An innocent!” spluttered Holly, and it took an especially outlandish statement to make her splutter. “You are Artemis Fowl! For years, you were public enemy number one.”

“I am not Artemis Fowl,” protested Orion. “I share his body and his knowledge of the Gnommish tongue, among other things, but I have a completely different personality. I am what is known as an alter ego.”

Holly snorted. “I don’t think that defense will stand up in front of a tribunal.”

“Oh, it does,” said Orion happily. “All the time.”

Holly wormed up the slide of wafer slop to the lip of the crater in which the small band sheltered.

“No signs of hostiles. They appear to have descended into the underground craters.”

“*Appear?*” said Foaly. “Can’t you be a little more specific?”

Holly shook her head. “No. I’m on eyes only. All our instruments are out. We have no link outside our own local network. I would guess that the probe is blocking communications.”

Foaly was busy grooming himself, peeling long strings of gluey nano-wafers from his flank. “It’s designed to emit a broad-spectrum jammer if it’s under attack, knocking out communications and weapons. I’m surprised Artemis’s cannon fired, and I would imagine your guns have been isolated by now, and shut down.”

Holly checked her Neutrino. Dead as a doornail. There was nothing on her helmet readout either except a slowly revolving red skull icon, which signaled catastrophic systems failure.

“D’Arvit,” she hissed. “No weapons, no communications. How are we supposed to stop this thing?”

The centaur shrugged. “It’s a probe, not a battleship. It should be easy enough to destroy once radar picks it up. If this is some mastermind’s plot to destroy the fairy world, then he’s not much of a mastermind.”

Orion raised a finger. “I feel I should point out, correct me if Artemis is misremembering, but didn’t your instruments dismally fail to pick up this probe in the first place?”

Foaly scowled. “I was just starting to like you a little better than the other one.”

Holly stood erect. “We need to follow the probe.

Work out where it’s going and somehow get word through to Haven.”

Orion smiled. “You know, Miss Holly, you look very dramatic like that, backlit by the fire. Very attractive, if I may say so. I know you shared a *moment passionné* with Artemis, which he subsequently fouled up with his typical boorish behavior. Let me just throw something out there for you to consider while we’re chasing the probe: I share Artemis’s passion but not his boorishness. No pressure; just think about it.”

This was enough to elicit a deafening moment of silence even in the middle of a crisis, which Orion seemed to be blissfully unaffected by.

Foaly was the first to speak. “What’s that look you have on your face there, Commander Short? What’s going through your head right now? Don’t think about it, just tell me.”

Holly ignored him, but that didn’t stop the centaur talking.

“You had a moment of passion with Artemis Fowl?” he said. “I don’t remember reading that in your report.”

Holly may have been blushing, or it may have been the aforementioned dramatic backlighting. “It wasn’t in my report, okay? Because there was no moment of passion.”

Foaly didn’t give up so easily. “So nothing happened, Holly?”

“Nothing worth talking about. When we went back in time, my emotions got a little jumbled. It was temporary, okay? Can we please focus? We are supposed to be professionals.”

“Not me,” said Orion cheerily. “I’m just a teenager with hormones running wild. And may I say, young fairy lady, they’re running wild in your direction.”

Holly lifted her visor and looked the hormonal teenager in the eye. “This had better not be a game, Artemis. If you do not have some serious psychosis, you will be sorry.”

“Oh, I’m crazy, all right. I do have plenty of psychoses,” said Orion cheerily. “Multiple personality, delusional dementia, OCD. I’ve got them all, but most of all, I’m crazy about you.”

“That’s not a bad line,” muttered Foaly. “He is definitely not Artemis.”

Holly stamped the slush from her boots. “We have two objectives: first, we need to hide evidence of fairy technology, i.e. the shuttle, from curious humans until such time as we can send a LEPretrieval team to haul it below. And our second objective is to somehow stay on the tail of that probe and get a message through to Police Plaza that it’s up here.” She glanced sharply at Foaly. “Could this be a simple malfunction?”

“No,” said the centaur with absolute certainty. “And I say that with absolute certainty. That probe has been deliberately reprogrammed, the amorphobots too. They were never meant to be used as weapons.”

“Then we have an enemy. Police Plaza needs to be warned.”

Holly turned to Orion. “Well, any ideas?”

The boy’s eyebrows rose a notch. “Bivouac?”

Holly rubbed the spot on her forehead where a headache had just blossomed.

“Bivouac. Fabulous.”

From behind came a sudden wrenching noise as the shuttle sank a little lower in the ice like a defeated warrior.

“You know,” mused Foaly, “that ship is pretty heavy and the rock shelf there is not very—”

Before he could finish, the entire shuttle disappeared into the landscape, taking the restaurant with it, as though both had been swallowed by a subterranean kraken.

Seconds later, Artemis's Ice Cube nano-wafer cannon tumbled into the newborn chasm.

"That was incredibly quiet," said Orion. "If I hadn't seen it, I would never have known."

"This terrain is like dwarf cheese. Full of holes," said Holly, then she was up and gone, racing across the ice toward the new crater.

Orion and Foaly took their time strolling across the glacier, chatting amiably.

"On the plus side," said Foaly, "there's our first objective achieved. The evidence is gone."

Orion nodded, then asked, "Dwarf cheese?"

"Cheese made by dwarfs."

"Oh," said Orion, relieved. "They make it. It's not actually . . ."

"No. What a horrible thought."

"Exactly."

The hole in the surface of the ice revealed a cavernous underworld. A subterranean river pulsed along, tearing shreds from what was left of the Great Skua restaurant. The water was deep blue and moving with such power that it almost seemed alive. Great chunks of ice, some the size of elephants, sheared away from the banks, tumbled against the current, and then submitted to its will, gathering speed until they struck the building, pulverizing what was left. The only sound was one of raging water; the building seemed to surrender without a whimper.

The shuttle had become impaled on an ice ridge below a slight bank in the underground river. An ice bank that could not survive the pounding waters for long. The craft was stripped down by the brute force of nature until only a small section remained, an obsidian arrowhead jammed point down into the ice and rock.

"The shuttle's escape pod," shouted Holly. "Of course."

Objective two, staying on the probe's tail, was now actually possible. If they could board the pod, and if the pod still had any power in it, they would be able to follow the probe and try to get a message to LEP headquarters.

Holly tried to scan the small craft with her helmet, but her beams were still blocked.

She turned to the centaur. "Foaly? What do you think?"

Foaly did not need her question explained. There was only one thing to think about: the escape pod wedged into the ice below them.

"Those things are damn near indestructible and built to hold the entire crew in a pinch. Also, the power source is a solid fuel block, so there aren't many moving parts to go wrong. All the usual modes of communication are on board, plus a good old-fashioned radio, which our secret enemy might not have thought to block, though considering he thought to phase the probe's shield to repulse our own sensors, I doubt there's much he didn't think of."

Holly lay down and wiggled forward until her torso hung over the rim, spray from the subterranean river painting a sheen on her visor.

"So that's our way out, if we can make it down."

Foaly clopped his front hooves. "We don't all have to make it down. Some of us are a tad less nimble than others, those with hooves for example. You could hop on down there, then fly the pod back up to collect the rest of us."

"That makes perfect sense," said Orion. "But I should be the one to go. Chivalry demands that I take the risk."

Foaly scowled. "Come on, Holly. Please sedate this deluded idiot."

Orion cleared his throat. "You are not being very sensitive to my illness, centaur."

Holly seriously considered the sedation, then shook her head. "Artemis . . . Orion is right. One of us should go."

Holly unraveled a piton cord from the reel on her belt, quickly wrapping it around one of the exposed steel rods in the restaurant's foundations.

"What are you doing?" asked Orion.

Holly strode briskly to the hole. "What you were going to do in about five seconds' time."

"Haven't you read the classics?" shouted Orion. "I should go."

"That's right," she said. "You should go." And she hopped into the underground cavern.

Orion made an animalistic noise, if the animal were a tiger having its tail tied in a knot, and he actually stamped his foot.

"Wow," said Foaly. "Foot stamping. You are really angry."

"It would seem so," said Orion, peering over the edge.

"Generally, the foot stamping is on the other foot, as you are usually the one driving Holly crazy. The other you."

"I can't say I'm surprised," said Orion, calming somewhat. "I can be insufferable."

The youth lay flat on the ice.

"You're on a good line, Holly," he said, almost to himself. "You should definitely miss that big wall of ice."

"I doubt it," grunted Foaly, and, as it turned out, the centaur was right.

Captain Short went down faster than she would have liked, which was totally due to equipment malfunction. If the reel at her belt had not been damaged during the recent amorphobot attack, then it would have automatically slowed her descent, and Holly could have avoided the impact that was surely to come. As it was, she was more or less falling at full g with nothing to lessen her impact other than a slight tension from the piton line.

A thought flashed through Holly's mind even faster than the ice could flash past her head.

I hope nothing breaks; I have no magic left to fix it.

Then she crashed into the ice wall with her knees and elbows. It was harder than rock and sharper than glass, cutting her uniform as though it were paper. Cold and pain jittered along her limbs, and there was a cracking noise, but it was surface ice and not bones.

The wall sloped gradually to the bank of the underground glacier run-off river, and Holly Short slid down helplessly, tumbling end over end, landing feetfirst through sheer luck. The final gasp of air huffed from her lungs as the shock of impact traveled along her legs. She prayed for a spark of magic, but nothing came to take away the pain.

Get a move on, soldier, she told herself, imagining Julius Root giving the order.

She scrambled across the ice bank, seeing her own distorted reflection in the ice stare wild-eyed back at her, like a desperate swimmer trapped under a skating pond.

Look at that face. I could use a day in a sludge-immersion tank, she thought.

Usually the idea of spending time in a relaxation spa would horrify Holly, but today it seemed a most attractive prospect.

Regeneration sludge and cucumber eye pads. Lovely.

No point dreaming about it now, though. There was work to be done.

Holly scrambled to the escape pod. The river rushed past, pounding the fuselage, hammering

cracks in the ice.

I hate the cold. I really hate it.

Mist rose in freezing clouds from the water, draping a spectral blue tent over the massive stalactites.

Spectral blue tent? thought Holly. Maybe I should write a poem. I wonder what rhymes with *crushed*?

Holly kicked at the ice clustered at the pod's base, clearing the hatch, thankful that the doorway wasn't completely submerged, as, without her Neutrino, she would have no way to clear it.

The captain channeled all the day's frustrations into the next few minutes of furious kicking. Holly stamped on that ice as though it had somehow been responsible for blowing up the shuttle, as though its crystals were somehow to blame for the probe's attack. Whatever the source of Holly's strength, her efforts bore fruit, and soon the hatch's outline was visible beneath a transparent sheath of mashed ice.

A voice floated down from above. "Helloooo. Holly. Are you okay?"

There was another phrase at the end. Muffled. Could this Orion person have called her *fair lady* again? Holly fervently hoped not.

"I . . . am . . . fine!" she grunted, each word punctuated with another blow to the shell of ice.

"Try not to become too stressed," said the echoing voice. "Do a few breathing exercises."

Unreal, thought Holly. This guy has lived in the back of Artemis's head for so long that he has no idea how to handle the actual world.

She wormed her fingers into the recessed handle grip, flicking away tenacious clots of ice blocking the handle. The hatch was purely mechanical, so there was no problem with jammers, but that did not necessarily hold for the pod's controls. The rogue probe could theoretically have fried the pod's guidance systems just as easily as it had taken out their communications.

Holly planted a boot on the hull and hauled the hatch open. A deluge of pink disinfectant gel poured out, pooling around her second boot, and quickly evaporated to mist.

Disinfectant gel. In case whatever destroyed the shuttle had been bacterial.

She poked her head inside, and the motion sensors heated a couple of phosphorescent plates on the roof panels.

Good. Emergency power, at least.

The escape pod was totally inverted, pointed straight down to the center of the Earth. The interior was Spartan and made with soldiers in mind, not passengers.

Orion is going to love this, she thought, strapping herself into the pilot's harness. There were six separate belts in the harness, as this ship had little in the way of gyroscopes or suspension.

Maybe I can shake Artemis out of his own brain. We can count up to five together.

She flexed her fingers, then allowed them to hover above the control panel.

Nothing happened. No activation, no sudden heads-up controls. No icon asking her for a start code.

Stone age it is, thought Holly, and leaned forward to the limits of her harness, reaching underneath the console for a good old-fashioned steering wheel and manual propulsion controls.

She pressed the ignition plunger, and the engine coughed.

Come on. I have things to do.

One more press and the escape pod's pitiful engine caught and turned over, irregular as a dying man's breathing, but it turned over nevertheless.

Thank you.

Holly thought this just before jets of black smoke blurred through the vents into the cabin, making her splutter.

There's some damage, but we should be okay.

Holly cranked open the for'ard porthole and was alarmed by the view that was suddenly revealed. She had expected to see the blue waters of a subterranean river splashing across the transparent polymer, but instead she saw an abyss. The pod had punched into a vast underground cavern that seemed to run right through the glacier in a dizzyingly sheer drop toward the bedrock below. Rippling walls of ice stretched below her, illuminated by the distant flickering blue lights of the probe's engines as it made its way into the depths of the cavern.

There it is. Heading down.

Holly hit the thaw button for the fuel block and tapped her fingers impatiently while it heated up.

"What I need now," she muttered to herself, "is reverse. And quickly."

But reverse did not come soon enough. The glacier river worked its tendrils into the ice ridge supporting the escape pod, and quickly stripped it away. For a moment the probe hung suspended, then it dropped through the hole and fell powerless straight down.

A couple of minutes earlier, the boy who wore Artemis Fowl's face had been standing on the surface, peering down at Holly Short. Appreciating her labors and admiring her form.

"She's a feisty one, *n'est-ce pas?* Look at her battling the elements."

Foaly clopped to his side. "Come on, Artemis. You can't kid me. What are you up to?"

Orion's face was smooth. On him, Artemis's features seemed open and trustworthy. This was a neat trick, as, on Artemis, these same features seemed conniving and almost sinister, some would say sneaky. Indeed, one music teacher did use this term in Artemis's school report, which was quite an unprofessional thing to do, but in fairness, Artemis had rewired the man's keyboard so that it would only play "Jingle Bells" no matter what keys were pressed.

"I am not up to anything," said Orion. "I am alive and I am here. That is all. I have Artemis's memories but not his disposition. I believe that I owe my sudden appearance to what fairies would call an Atlantis Complex."

Foaly wagged a finger. "Nice try, but Atlantis Complex generally manifests itself through compulsion and delusion."

"Stage two."

Foaly took a moment to consult his near photographic memory.

"Atlantis Complex stage two can result in the subject displaying signs of several completely different and distinct personalities."

"And?" prompted Orion.

"Stage two can be initiated by either or both mental trauma or physical shock, typically electrocution."

"Holly shot me. So there we go."

Foaly scraped the snow with a hoof. "That's the problem with beings of our intellect. We can argue our points of view all day without either gaining a significant advantage. That's what happens when you're a genius." The centaur smiled. "Look, I scraped an *F* for *Foaly*."

"That is excellent work," said Orion. "Such straight lines. That takes hoof control."

"I know," said Foaly. "It's a real talent, but there's no forum for this kind of expression."

Foaly was well aware that he was babbling about hoof drawings in order to distract himself from

the current situation. He had often assisted Holly through one crisis or another. But he had rarely been in the field to actually witness these crises occurring.

The video logs never really capture the emotion, he thought. I am scared out of my wits right now, but no helmet-cam footage can convey that.

It scared Foaly that someone had managed to hack his space probe and reprogram the amorphobots. It scared him that this person had no regard for life—fairy, human, or animal. And it totally terrified him that if, gods forbid, Holly was injured or worse, then it would be up to him and this simpering alternate Fowl personality to warn Haven, and he hadn't the first idea how he was qualified for this job, unless the talents of smart-aleckry and rapid V-board manipulation were somehow called for. Artemis would know what to do, but apparently Artemis wasn't at home right now.

Foaly realized with a jolt that the current situation was quite close to being his own worst nightmare, especially if it eventually led to Caballine shaving him. Control was very important to Foaly, and here he was stuck on a glacier with a damaged human, watching their only hope of salvation fighting an underground river.

His current worst nightmare was suddenly relegated to second place as the escape pod, with Holly inside it, was suddenly swallowed whole by the ice. Loose chunks tumbled quickly to fill the hole, and before Foaly had time to gasp in shock, it was as if the craft had never been there.

Foaly sank to his fore-knees. "Holly!" he called desperately. "Holly."

Orion was equally distraught. "Oh, Captain Short.

There was so much I wanted to tell you, about how we feel, Artemis and I. You were so young, with so much left to give." Fat tears rolled down his cheeks. "Oh, Artemis, poor foolish, Artemis. You had so much and did not know it."

Foaly felt hollowed out by sudden, wrenching grief. Holly was gone. Their last best chance of warning Haven. How could he hope to succeed aided only by a mooning Mud Boy who began every second sentence with the word "Oh"?

"Shut up, Orion! Shut up. A person is gone. A real person." The ice was hard beneath Foaly's knees, and made their situation seem more desperate.

"I don't have much experience with real people," admitted Orion, slumping beside the centaur. "Or feelings that translate to the world. But I think I am sad now. And lonely. We have lost a friend."

These were words from the heart, and Foaly felt he had to be sympathetic. "Okay. It's not your fault. We have both lost someone special."

Orion sniffed. "Good. Then, worthy centaur, perhaps you could give me a ride to the village on your back. Then I can make a few pennies with my verses while you build us a shack and perform circus tricks for passersby."

This was such a surprising statement that Foaly briefly considered jumping into the hole to get away.

"This isn't Middle Earth, you know. We're not in a novel. I am not noble, neither do I have a repertoire of circus tricks."

Orion seemed disappointed. "Can you juggle at least?"

Orion's idiocy was just what Foaly needed to shake him temporarily from his grief. He jumped to his feet and stomped in a circle around Orion.

"What are you? *Who* are you? I thought you shared Artemis's memories. How can you be so stupid?"

Orion was unperturbed. "I share everything. Memories and movies are as real as each other to me.

You, Peter Pan, the Loch Ness Monster, me. It's all real, maybe."

Foaly rubbed his forehead. "We are in so much trouble. Gods help us."

Orion brightened. "I have an idea."

"Yes?" said Foaly, daring to hope that a spark of Artemis remained.

"Why don't we look for some magic stones that can grant wishes? Or, if that doesn't work, you could search my naked body for some mysterious birthmark that means I am actually the prince of somewhere or other."

"Okay," sighed Foaly. "Why don't you get started on the stones thing, and I'll scrape some magical runes in the snow."

Orion clapped his hands sharply. "Excellent notion, noble creature." And he began kicking over stones to see if any of them were magical.

The complex is progressing, realized Foaly. He wasn't this deluded only minutes ago. The more desperate the situation becomes the further from reality he gets. If we can't get Artemis back soon, he will be gone forever.

"I found one!" Orion shouted suddenly. "A magic stone!" He bent to examine his discovery. "No. Wait. It's a shellfish of some kind." He smiled apologetically at Foaly. "I saw it scuttling and so I assumed . . ."

Foaly thought a thought he had thought he would never think.

I would prefer to be with Mulch Diggums.

This notion caused him to shudder.

Orion yelped loudly and scuttled backward. "I found it. Really, this time. Look, Foaly. Look!"

Foaly looked, in spite of himself, and was amazed to see that a stone actually did seem to be dancing.

"That's not possible," he said, and wondered, Is he somehow sucking me into his delusion?

Orion was jubilant. "Everything is real. I am abroad in the world."

The stone flipped high into the air, spinning off across the frozen lake. Where it had been, the black hull of the escape pod punctured the ice. It rose and rose above a bass rumbling of engines that set the ice plates vibrating themselves to pieces.

It took Foaly a moment to realize what was happening, but then he too was jubilant.

"Holly!" he called. "You made it. You didn't leave us."

The escape pod lurched to the surface, then toppled on its side. The for'ard porthole was winched open, and Holly's face appeared in the frame. She was pale and bleeding from a dozen minor cuts, but her eyes were bright and determined.

"Took a while for the fuel block to dissolve," she explained over the engine noise. "Get inside, both of you, and buckle up. We have to catch that fire-breathing monster."

This was a simple order, and both Foaly and Orion could obey without their realities clashing.

Holly is alive, thought Foaly.

My princess lives, exulted Orion. And we're chasing a dragon.

"Foaly," he called after the centaur. "I really think we should search for my secret birthmark. Dragons love that sort of thing."

Artemis Fowl's Brain; Now

Artemis was not gone completely. He was confined to a small virtual room in his own brain. The room

was similar to his Fowl Manor office, but there were no screens on the situations wall. In fact, there was no wall. Where his selection of gas screens and digital televisions had been mounted, there now floated a window into his body's reality. He could see what the fool Orion saw, and hear the ridiculous sentences dripping from his own mouth, but he could not control the actions of the romantic nincompoop who seemed to be in the driver's seat, to use a motorcar reference that Butler and Holly would appreciate.

In Artemis's room there was a desk and a chair. He wore one of his lightweight Zegna bespoke suits. He could see the weave of threads on his arm and feel the material's weight as though it were real, but Artemis knew all these things were illusions constructed by his mind to put some order on the chaos in his brain.

He sat upon the chair.

In front of Artemis, on what he had decided to call his mind-screen, events played out in the real world. He winced as the usurper, Orion, rolled out his clumsy charm.

He will utterly destroy my relationship with Holly, he thought.

Now he appeared to be treating Foaly like some kind of mythical pet.

Orion was right about one thing: he was in the second stage of Atlantis Complex, a mental illness he had brought on himself through a combination of reckless dabblings in fairy magic and feelings of guilt.

I brought the guilt on myself too, exposing my mother to Opal Koboï.

Artemis realized suddenly that while he was trapped in his own mind, numbers held no sway over him. Neither did he feel any compulsion to rearrange the objects on his desk.

I am free.

A metaphorical weight lifted from his allegorical chest, and Artemis Fowl felt himself again. Vital, sharp, focused, for the first time in months. Ideas fluttered from his mind like bats from the mouth of a cave.

So much to do. So many projects. Butler . . . I need to find him.

Artemis felt energized and potent. He surged from his chair toward the mind-screen. He would push his way through, force his way out, and send this Orion character back to where he came from. Next on his to-do list would be to apologize to Foaly and Holly for his rudeness and then get to the bottom of this space-probe hijack. His Ice Cube had been torn to pieces by the subterranean river, but it could be rebuilt. In months the project could be operational.

And when the glaciers were safe, perhaps he would submit to a little regression therapy from one of the People's less flamboyant psychotherapists. Certainly not that Cumulus fellow who had his own talk show.

When Artemis reached the screen, he found it to be less solid than it had first appeared. In fact, it was deep and gloopy, reminding Artemis of the plasma conduit he had crawled through at Opal Koboï's lab all those years ago. Nevertheless, he forged ahead and soon found himself submerged in a cold, viscous gel that pushed him backward with floppy fingers.

"I will not be deterred," shouted Artemis, finding that he could shout inside the mind-screen. "I am needed in the wide world."

And then.

Deterred? Wide world? I am beginning to sound like that idiot Orion.

This thought gave him strength, and he tore at the curtains of gunk that kept him a prisoner. It felt good being active and positive. Artemis felt like the Fowl heir of old. Unstoppable.

Then he spotted something in the air before him. Bright and fizzling like a Halloween sparkler. There were more, dozens, all around him, sinking slowly through the gel.

What were they? What could those things mean?

I made them, thought Artemis. I should know.

A moment later he did know. The fizzling sparklers were actually tiny golden numbers. All the same number.

All fours. Death.

Artemis recoiled, but then rallied.

No. I will not be a slave. I refuse.

A tiny number four grazed his elbow, sending a shock through his entire body.

This is a memory, nothing more. My mind is reconstructing the plasma conduit. None of this is real.

But the shocks felt real. Once the tiny fours realized that he was there, they gathered like a shoal of malignant fish, herding Artemis back to the safety of his office.

He fell backward to the floor, panting.

I need to try again, he thought.

But not yet. The fours seemed to watch him, matching his movements.

Five, thought Artemis. I need five to stay alive. I will try again soon. Soon.

Artemis felt a weight settle on his chest that seemed too heavy to be just his imagination.

I will try soon. Hold on, my friends.

TRIMMING THE WEIGHT

The Deeps, Atlantis; Now

Prisoner 42 checked the LEP's official site and was amused to see that he was no longer on the Top Ten Most Dangerous list.

They forget what I have done, he thought with some satisfaction. Which is exactly as I planned.

Turnball sent a quick V-mail to Leonor, one of the dozen he sent daily.

Prepare yourself for travel, darling. I shall be with you soon.

He waited breathlessly for the reply, and it soon came. A single word.

Hurry.

Turnball was cheered by the prompt response: even after all these years they hung on each other's words.

But he was a little worried too. Lately, all of Leonor's messages had been brief, often no more than a phrase. He did not believe that his darling wife was not inclined to write more—he believed that she grew too weak, the effort was too painful.

Turnball sent a second mail to Ark Sool, an LEP turncoat he had recently employed to make sure his wife and affairs were well looked after.

Leonor grows weaker without my fairy magic beside her, Mr. Sool. Take special care.

Turnball grew suddenly impatient.

Mere hours separate us, my dear. Hold on for me.

The authorities were mistaken, of course. Turnball Root was extremely dangerous. They had forgotten he was the elf who had stolen millions from the LEP's own weapons' budget. The elf who had almost managed to destroy half of Haven City just to get rid of a competitor.

I would have done it too, he thought for the thousandth time. If not for my holier-than-thou little brother.

He banished this thought. Thinking about Julius would just get his vitals up, and the jailers might notice.

I should give myself a little treat, he thought, sitting down at his terminal. It could be the last one before I go. Vishby will come for me soon, and then the LEP will realize their mistake. Too late, of course.

He smiled at his reflection on the screen as he typed a brief message for a certain Web site.

One is never too old for mischief, Turnball realized as he pressed send.

The Sozzled Parrot, Miami; Now

It is a universal law that fugitives flock together. No matter how large the posse on their tail, people on the run always manage to find that one low-down dirty dive, with the cheapest hooch, run by the dodgiest innkeeper, that not even the police know about. These establishments generally have steel doors, paint over their windows, mold in their bathroom stalls, and don't serve anything with more than two ingredients. The Sozzled Parrot was such a place.

The owner was a certain dwarf called Barnet Riddles who ruled the roost with a certain wheedling

panache that made him a likeable host in a sleazy sort of way. And if wheedling panache was not enough to calm a troublemaker down, then Barnet would follow it with a tap from a stolen LEP buzz baton.

The Sozzled Parrot was a dwarf hangout, and the club motto was: *If you are not welcome there, then you are welcome here*, which meant that every exiled criminal or slumming fairy in North America sooner or later turned up at The Sozzled Parrot. Barnet Riddles made the perfect host, as, by some freak of nature, he was one of only a tiny percentage of fairies who were over four feet tall. And so, as long as he wore a bandanna to cover his ears, Barnet was the ideal go-between with the humans, who supplied him with liquor, slightly turned beef for his quesadillas, and as much firepower as he could shift out of the back room.

The early hours of this morning in The Sozzled Parrot were pretty much the same as any other. Dwarfs sat hunched over tankards of ale in one of the booths. A couple of sprites were playing video crunchball on their handhelds, and half a dozen elfin soldiers of fortune were trading war stories by the pool table.

Barnet Riddles was deep in conversation with a dwarf at the bar.

“Come on, Tombstone,” he wheedled in a charming way. “Buy a couple of guns. A grenade at least. All you do is sit there and drink creek water. Isn’t there someone you’d like to shoot a couple of times?”

The dwarf grinned, baring his trademark tombstone teeth. “It’s getting that way, Riddles.”

Barnet was not discouraged—then again this particular dwarf was a born optimist. Who else would set up a bar for photosensitive dwarfs in sunny Miami?

It’s the last place the Leppers will look for us fugitives from justice, he often explained. *They’re up freezing their LEP tails off in Russia, meanwhile we’re sinking beers here in luxurious air-conditioned surroundings.*

Luxurious was a stretch. Even *clean* would have been a stretch. But The Sozzled Parrot was somewhere for fairy soldiers of fortune to meet and exchange war stories day or night, and so they were prepared to put up with Barnet’s exorbitant prices and his constant sales pitches.

“How about a computer implant?” persisted the innkeeper. “Everybody has implants these days. How do you keep tabs on the LEP?”

Tombstone pulled down the brim of his felt hat so that it covered his eyes. “Believe it or not, Riddles, I’m not on the hot list anymore. What you are looking at now is a one hundred percent legit citizen. Heck, I’ve even got a visa to be aboveground.”

“Groomchunks,” said Barnet doubtfully.

Tombstone slid a plastic square across the bar. “Read it and weep.”

Barnet squinted at the Gnommish writing and checked the official hologram.

“Looks pretty real,” he admitted.

“That is because it is real, my beer-watering friend.”

Barnet shook his head. “I don’t get it. If you can be anywhere, why are you here?”

Tombstone tossed a handful of beezel nuts into his cavernous mouth, and Barnet swore that after each crunch there was an echo.

“I am here,” said Tombstone eventually, “because of the clientele.”

Barnet was even more befuddled. “What? Thieves, mercenaries, extortionists, and forgers?”

Tombstone’s grin was wide and bright. “Yep. My kind of people.”

Barnet checked on a pitcher of toad sludge that he was fermenting for the pixies.

“You are a riot, Tombstone. Do you know that?”

Before Tombstone could answer, a plastic parrot on the bar opened its beak and squawked.

“New post,” squawked its animatronic mouth. “New post on the message board.”

“Excuuuuuse me,” said Barnet Riddles, with exaggerated politeness, “while I check this extremely handy implant I have in my head.”

“Handy, until you pass a microwave and lose ten years of memory,” commented Tombstone. “Then again, you spend so much time in here that you probably wouldn’t miss the odd decade.”

Barnet was not listening. His eyes fogged over as he checked the illegal implant that had been hotwired directly into his cortex by a disbarred doctor. After a couple of “*hmmms*” and one “*really*,” he returned to the here and now.

“How are the brain cells?” enquired Tombstone mildly. “I hope the message was worth it.”

“Don’t you worry about it, Mr. Hundred Percent Legit,” said Barnet briskly. “This one is for us criminals.”

He pounded the bar with his buzz baton, sending sparks rippling across the length of the brass rail.

“Cruik,” he called across the room. “You have a ship? Right?”

One of the dwarfs at the end booth raised a grizzled head. Beer foam fell in blobs from his beard. “Yeah. I got a gyro. A bit of a crock, but she runs okay.”

Barnet clapped his hands, already counting his commission. “Good. A job came in on the board. Two humans, kill ’em dead.”

Cruik shook his head slowly. “No killing dead. We may be criminals but we’re not humans.”

“The client will accept a full wipe. Can you stomach that?”

“Full wipe?” interrupted Tombstone. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Barnet sniggered. “Not if you keep your fingers away from the electrodes. Two humans, brother and sister by the name of Butler.”

Tombstone twitched. “Butler? Brother and sister?”

Barnet closed one eye, consulting his implant. “Yeah. I’m shooting the details across to your gyro, Cruik. This is a rush job. Top dollar, as the Mud Men would say.”

The dwarf called Cruik checked the charge in an old-fashioned blunderbuss Neutrino.

“These Mud Men won’t be saying much of anything by the time I’m finished with them.” He pounded the table to summon his warriors. “Let’s go, my fine fellows. We have brains to suck.”

Tombstone stood quickly. “Do you guys have room for one more?”

“I knew it,” chuckled Barnet Riddles. “One hundred percent legit, I don’t think so. As soon as I laid eyes on you, ‘This guy has history,’ I said.”

Cruik was buckling on a belt loaded with spikes, shells, and dangerous-looking implements with fuses and capacitors.

“Why should I take you, stranger?”

“You should take me because if your pilot gets killed to death by these Butler humans, then I can take his place.”

An uncharacteristically skinny dwarf looked up from the romance novel he was reading. “Killed to death?” he said, lip trembling slightly. “I say, Cruik, is that likely?”

“I’ve had experience with the Butlers,” said Tombstone. “They always go for the pilot first.”

Cruik sized up Tombstone, taking in his powerful jaws and muscled legs.

“Okay stranger. You take the copilot’s chair. You get a junior share and no quibbling.”

Tombstone grinned. “Why quibble now when we can quibble later?”

Cruik thought about this statement for a moment until his brain ached.

“Okay. Whatever. Everybody take a sober pill and mount up. We have some humans to wipe.”

Tombstone followed his new captain across the bar floor. “How good is your mind-wiping equipment?”

Cruik shrugged. “Who cares?” he said simply.

“I like your attitude,” said Tombstone.

Cancún, Mexico; Now

The Butlers in question were of course the very same Butlers who had escaped the *mesmerized* wrestling fans, and who were now, thirty minutes after Cruik took on his new copilot, taking a moment to catch their breath in the morning sunshine on the shore of Cancún’s lagoon. These two were being pursued by Turnball Root more for his own entertainment than the possibility that they could actually interfere with his plans. Though it was possible that opponents as formidable as the Butlers had proved themselves to be troublesome. And Turnball’s plans were delicate enough without adding troublesome humans to the mix. Better to wipe them, at least. Also, they had escaped the first time, so Turnball was irked, which he did not like.

Juliet squatted just above the waterline, listening to the sounds of party laughter and the tinkling of champagne flutes stream across the water from a passing yacht. “I have an idea, brother,” she said. “Why don’t we ask Artemis for a million dollars and just retire? Well, I could retire. You could be *my* butler.”

Butler sat beside her. “Frankly, I don’t think Artemis has a million dollars. He’s put everything into this latest project. *THE PROJECT*, as he calls it.”

“What’s he stealing now?”

“Nothing. Artemis has moved on from crime. These days he’s saving the world.”

Juliet’s arm froze halfway through the motion of throwing a pebble. “Artemis Fowl has moved on from crime? *Our* Artemis Fowl? Isn’t that against Fowl family law?”

Butler didn’t exactly smile, but his scowl definitely grew less pronounced. “This is hardly the time for jokes, sister.” He paused. “But if you must know, the Fowl statutes actually state that a family member caught straying onto the straight and narrow can have his Doctor Evil manual and suction cups confiscated.”

Juliet snickered. “Suction cups.”

Butler’s customary scowl quickly reasserted itself. “Seriously, sister. This is a sinister situation we find ourselves in. Pursued by fairy agents and on the far side of the world from my principal.”

“What are you even doing here? Who sent you on this wild-geese chase?”

Butler had been thinking about this. “Artemis sent me. He must have been coerced, though it didn’t seem so. Perhaps he was tricked.”

“Tricked? Artemis Fowl? He has changed.”

Butler frowned, patting the spot where his shoulder holster would normally hang. “Artemis has changed. You would barely recognize him now, he is so different.”

“Different? How?”

Butler’s frown deepened, a slash between his eyebrows. “He counts everything. Steps, words, everything. I think five is the big number. Also, rows. He groups all the stuff around him into little rows. Usually five per row, or ten.”

“I’ve heard about stuff like that. Obsessive-compulsive disorder. OCD.”

“And he’s paranoid. He doesn’t trust anyone.” Butler’s head dropped to his chest. “Not even me.”

Juliet tossed the pebble far into the lagoon. “It sounds like Artemis needs help.”

Butler nodded. “How about you? You’ve had quite a bit sprung on you in the past hour.”

Juliet raked the shoreline with her fingers, gathering pebbles. “What? You mean little things like being chased by a *mesmerized* horde? And the fact that fairies do exist? Those tiny things?”

Butler grunted. He had forgotten how much his sister made fun of him and how he, for some reason, put up with it. “Yes, those *tiny* things,” he said, elbowing her fondly.

“Don’t worry about me, brother. I’m a modern woman. We’re tough and smart, hadn’t you heard?”

“I get it. You’re *coping*, is that it?”

“No, brother. I feel fine. The Butlers are together, and nothing can stand against us.”

“The new memories aren’t freaking you out?”

Juliet laughed, and the sound did Butler’s heart good. “*Freaking me out?* Where are we, the 1970s? And, no, the memories aren’t freaking me out. As a matter of fact, they feel . . .” She thought about her next sentence for a while. “They feel right in my head. They belong where they are. How could I have forgotten Holly? Or Mulch?”

Butler pulled a pair of sunglasses from his jacket pocket. They were a little clunkier than the current style, and had tiny solar panels on the arms.

“With fairies on our tail, we may need these.” Juliet plucked them from his fingers, and the stimulus from the contact brought memories flooding back.

Artemis made these from disassembled LEP helmets, so we could see through Fairy shields. The LEP are sneaky, but Artemis is sneakier.

“I remember these glasses. Why did you even bring them?”

“Boy Scout rule number one: Be prepared. There are fairies around us all the time. I don’t want to accidentally shoot one, or miss one, for that matter.”

Juliet hoped her brother was being funny.

“You wouldn’t shoot a fairy,” said Juliet, slipping the glasses onto her face.

Immediately, something appeared in her vision as though it had popped out of a toaster. The *something* was certainly not human. It hung suspended from a harness and was aiming a bulbously barreled weapon at her head. Whatever it was wore a bodysuit that seemed to be made of a viscous tarlike substance, which clung to its wobbling torso and coated every hair of its shaggy beard.

“Shoot the fairy!” she yelled, shocked. “Shoot it!”

Most people might have assumed that Juliet was joking. After all, what were the chances that a fairy would show up the very moment she donned fairy filters? Not to mention the fact that Juliet was well known for her inappropriate sense of humor and regularly spouted witticisms in moments of mortal danger.

For example, when Christian Varley Penrose, her sous instructor at the Madame Ko Agency, lost his grip on the north face of Everest and went plummeting earthward with only a skinny girl between him and certain death, Juliet braced herself and called to her sensei as he pinwheeled past: “Hey, Penrose. Surely saving you is worth some extra credit.”

So it would be quite reasonable to assume that when Juliet yelled *Shoot the fairy* she was actually joshing her big brother, but Butler did not assume this for a second. He was trained to recognize stress registers, but even if Artemis hadn’t forced him to listen to that MP3 lecture in the car, he knew the difference between *genuinely shocked* Juliet and *having a laugh* Juliet. So when Juliet cried *Shoot the*

fairy, Butler decided on a course of aggressive action in the time it would take a hummingbird to flap its wings.

No gun, so no shooting, he thought. But there are options.

The option Butler chose was to grasp his sister's shoulder firmly and push her sideways so that she actually skidded along the pebbled beach, her shoulder plowing a furrow in the stones.

Scratched shoulder. I'll be hearing about that for weeks.

Butler swung both arms forward and used the momentum to pull himself up and into a full-tilt launch at whatever had spooked Juliet. At this point he could only hope that the *whatever* was close enough to grapple, otherwise there was a fairy somewhere laughing into his face mask and calmly aiming a weapon.

His luck held. Butler made contact with something squat and lumpy. Something that struggled and bucked like a pig in a blanket, and exuded a particular odor that a person might experience if that person were unfortunate enough to somehow end up facedown in a medieval swill patch.

I know that smell, Butler realized, holding on grimly. Dwarf.

Whatever was holding the dwarf up whined and dipped, dunking Butler and his wriggling captive into the lagoon's waist-high water. For Butler, the dunking was harmless enough—he was virtually clamped around the invisible dwarf, and in fact the cool water felt quite refreshing—but for the shimmer-suited fairy, the sudden dip was catastrophic. Abrasive contact with the sharp scree on the lagoon bed punctured his camouflage suit, breaking the skin, releasing the charge.

The dwarf, Cruik, was suddenly visible.

“Aha,” said Butler, hauling Cruik from the surf. “Dwarf head. Good.”

Cruik had forfeited his gift of tongues along with the rest of his magic, but he had been living among the humans for long enough to pick up a smattering of several languages, and Butler's simple statement was terrifyingly easy to misinterpret.

Dwarf head? This Mud Man is going to eat my head.

Butler was actually glad to see the dwarf's head because dwarf heads are disproportionately large, and this particular dwarf's head was even more bulbous than most. It was almost Butler-sized and there was a helmet perched on top of it.

With a fairy helmet, I can see what this little guy sees.

It was the helmet Butler was after, not the meaty noggin inside.

“C'mere, slippy,” grunted the bodyguard, intuitively snapping the helmet's seals and popping it off. “Did you just try to shoot my sister?”

Recognizing the word *shoot*, Cruik glanced down at his own hands and was dismayed to find them empty. He had dropped his gun.

Cruik was a career criminal and had lived through many close calls without losing his nerve. He had once faced down a gang of drunken goblins armed with only a jar of burn lotion and three bottle tops, but this bloodthirsty giant with a face of fury and a thirst for brains finally sent him over the edge.

“Nooooo,” he screamed shrilly. “No brain biting.”

Butler ignored the tantrum and the musty helmet pong and gripped the protective hat one-handed, as a basketball player might grip a basketball.

Cruik's skull was now totally exposed, and the dwarf swore he could feel his brain trembling.

When a dwarf finds himself unnerved to this extent, one of two things is likely to happen: one, the dwarf will unhook his jaw and attempt to eat its way out of trouble. This option was not available to

Cruik because of his suit's hood. And two: the terrified dwarf will *trim the weight*. Trimming the weight is an aviators' trick, which involves jettisoning as much unnecessary cargo as possible to keep the ship in the air. Dwarfs are capable of shedding up to a third of their body weight in less than five seconds. This is obviously a last resort and can only be performed once a decade or so. It involves a rapid expulsion of loose-layered *runny fat*, ingested mining dirt, and gases through what dwarf mummies politely refer to as the nether tunnel.

Trimming the weight is mostly an automatic response and will be engaged when the heart rate nudges past two hundred beats per minute, which happened to Cruik the moment Butler enquired whether Cruik had tried to shoot his sister. At that moment, Cruik more or less lost control of his bodily functions and had just time to scream "*No brain biting!*" before his body decided to trim the weight and use the resulting propulsion to get the heck out of there.

Of course, Butler was not aware of these biological details. All he knew was that he was suddenly flying backward, up high through the air, holding on to a jet-powered dwarf.

Not again, he thought, possibly the only human who would have this thought in this situation.

Butler saw Juliet shrinking into the distance, her mouth a shocked dark circle. And to Juliet it seemed as though her brother had suddenly developed the power of flight while wrestling a dwarf clad in a shiny hooded leotard.

I'll worry about Juliet worrying about me later, thought Butler, trying not to think about the glossy, bubbled stream pushing them farther into the sky and closer to whatever craft they were suspended from. *Look out below.*

Butler had a more urgent problem than Juliet worrying about him, which he realized upon jamming Cruik's helmet onto his own head. He and Cruik were coming up on the gyro, fast with no control over their approach. All Cruik could do was yell something about his brain, so it was up to Butler to see them through this alive. Altitude wasn't the problem. They weren't high enough to sustain any real damage, especially with a watery mattress below. The problem was the gyro's rotor blade, which would slice them both into fine strips if they passed through it, then doubtless the gyrocopter would explode and incinerate the slices. The engine was whisper quiet, but a couple of bodies passing through the blade would soon blow the mufflers.

My last act on Earth could be to expose the Fairy People, and there is nothing I can do to prevent it.

Up they went, whooshing backward, wind snagging their clothes, chilling their skin. The dwarf's eyes were wide and rolling, and his flesh hung in loose flaps.

He was chubby before. I'm sure of it.

The gyro blade was feet away as they whiplashed over the top of the craft and hung suspended for a nanosecond as Cruik finally ran out of nether-tunnel steam.

"Nice timing," snarled Butler, then down they went directly toward the rotors.

Still, thought Butler. Killed saving my sister from a murderous dwarf. It could be worse.

At the last possible moment, the gyro's rotor swiveled ninety degrees, tilting the craft dramatically, allowing Butler and Cruik to slot into it neatly on the leeward side.

Butler barely had a moment to thank his lucky stars when he was thrust into yet another perilous situation.

There seemed to be some serious fighting going on among an entire gang of dwarves. The passenger bay was littered with unconscious fairies while the three remaining dwarfs were slugging it out, two against one. The *one* had a bloody nose and a sooty star on his shoulder where someone had tagged him with a Neutrino, but still he seemed quite cheery.

“It’s about time you got here,” he said to Butler from the side of his mouth. “These guys are quite angry that I flipped their gyro.”

“Tombstone, you collaborator!” howled one of the remaining dwarfs.

“Tombstone?” said Butler, managing to groan and speak at the same time.

“Yeah,” said Butler’s old friend Mulch Diggums. “It’s my out-and-about name. And lucky for you I do go out.”

The gyro’s stabilizers steadied the craft, and Butler took advantage of the moment’s peace to disentangle himself from Cruik, whom he tossed out of the bay door.

“Ah, Cruik,” said Mulch. “Rarely does one meet someone with such a phonetically appropriate name.”

Butler wasn’t even listening. If there were a time to engage with Mulch’s ramblings, he hadn’t reached it yet. Instead he turned to the remaining hostile dwarfs.

“You two,” he said, treating them to his fiercest expression, an expression which had once made a troll think that maybe he had bitten off a little more than he could chew.

The two in question quailed under Butler’s gaze and wondered anxiously what this giant would order them to do.

Butler jerked a thumb toward the bay door. “Jump,” he said, keeping it simple. The dwarfs looked at each other, and the look spoke volumes.

Should we actually jump into daylight, they thought, or should we stay and fight this terrifying man mountain?

They held hands and jumped.

It took mere moments for Mulch to get control of the flight systems and drop the gyro down to scoop up Juliet.

“Hi-ho, Jade Princess,” he called from the pilot’s chair. “How’s the wrestling career going? I have an alter ego now too. Tombstone, they call me. What do you think?”

“I like it,” said Juliet, kissing Mulch’s cheek. “Thanks for rescuing us.”

Mulch smiled. “There was nothing on the TV. Except pay-per-view, and I refuse to buy programs, on principle. Except that chef guy with the foul mouth. I love him and what he can do with a turkey crown and a couple of string beans.”

Juliet’s newfound memories reminded her of Mulch’s obsession with food.

“So you just happened to be in a bar when the call came in to these guys?” said Butler doubtfully, throwing some emergency field packs to the stranded dwarfs below.

Mulch tugged the virtual joystick, quickly pulling the gyro into the clouds.

“Yes. It’s fate, my friends. I went against my own kind for you. I hope you appreciate it. Or rather, I hope your rich master appreciates it.”

Butler closed the hatch, shutting out the rush of air. “The way I remember it, I did most of the saving.”

“All you did was mess up my plan,” snorted the dwarf. “I was going to let them stun you both, winch you aboard, and then make my move.”

“Brilliant plan.”

“As opposed to throwing yourself into the gyro rotor blade?”

“Point taken.”

There was silence for a moment, the kind of silence you would definitely not get in a human flying

machine. Also the kind of silence you get when a small group of people wonder just how long they can keep emerging from certain-death situations with a reasonable amount of life in their bodies.

“We’re off again, I suppose?” said Mulch eventually.

“Off on another save-the-world, nick-of-time, seat-of-the-pants adventure?”

“Well, in the space of one night we have been attacked by zombie wrestling fans and invisible dwarfs,” said Butler glumly. “So it certainly looks like it.”

“Where to?” asked Mulch. “Nowhere too sunny, I hope. Or too cold. I hate snow.”

Butler found that he was smiling, not with fondness exactly, but not with wolfish menace either.

“Iceland,” he said.

The gyro dipped sharply as Mulch momentarily let go of the V-joystick. “If you’re kidding, Butler, that’s not funny.”

Butler’s smile disappeared. “No,” he said. “It isn’t.”

HOW DO I LOVE THEE?

Vatnajökull; Now

Orion Fowl chose to strap himself into the emergency evac harness directly behind Holly and spoke into her ear as she piloted the escape pod through the glacial wormhole excavated by the rogue probe.

Having a person talk directly into one's ear is irritating at the best of times, but when that person is spouting romantic nonsense while the owner of the ear is attempting to wrestle with the controls of a twenty-year-old escape pod in a high-speed pursuit, then it's a little more than annoying—it's dangerously distracting.

Holly scrubbed the porthole with the sleeve of her suit. Outside, a single nose beam picked out the wormhole's path.

Straight, she thought. At least it's straight. "How do I love thee?" wondered Orion. "Let me see. I love thee passionately and eternally . . . obviously eternally—that goes without saying."

Holly blinked sweat from her eyes. "Is he serious?" she called over her shoulder to Foaly.

"Oh, absolutely," said the centaur, his voice juddering along with the pod's motion. "If he asks you to look for birthmarks, say *no* immediately."

"Oh, I would never," Orion assured her. "Ladies don't look for birthmarks; that is work for jolly fellows, like the goodly beast and myself. Ladies, like Miss Short, do enough by simply existing. They exude beauty, and that is enough."

"I am not exuding anything," said Holly, through gritted teeth.

Orion tapped her shoulder. "I beg to differ. You're *exuding* right now, a wonderful aura. It's pastel blue with little dolphins."

Holly gripped the wheel tightly. "I'm going to be sick. Did he just say pastel blue?"

"And dolphins, little ones," said Foaly, happy enough to be distracted from the fact that they were now chasing the probe that had blown up their shuttle, which was a bit like a mouse chasing a cat, a giant mutant cat with laser eyes and a bellyful of smaller spiteful cats.

"Be quiet, *goodly beast*. Be quiet, both of you."

Holly could not afford to be distracted, so to shut out the babbling Orion, she talked herself through what she was doing, recording it all on the ship's log.

"Still going through the ice, an incredibly thick vein. No radar, or sonar, just following the lights."

The light show on display through the porthole was both eerie and colorful. The probe's engines shot beams along the carved ice, sending rainbows flickering across the flat planes. Holly was sure she saw an entire school of whales preserved in the glacier, and maybe some kind of enormous sea reptile.

"The probe maintains its course, a diagonal descent. We are transitioning from ice to rock now, with no discernable delay."

It was true: the increased density seemed to have no effect on the probe's laser cutters.

Foaly could not resist a smug comment. "I know how to build 'em," he said.

"But not how to control 'em," Holly rejoined.

"You have displeased the princess," cried Orion, thrashing in his harness. "Were it not for these accursed bonds . . ."

"You would be dead," said Foaly, completing the sentence for him.

“Good point,” Orion conceded. “And the princess is calm now, so no harm done, goodly fellow. I must mind my knight’s temper. Sometimes I rush to battle.”

Holly’s ears itched, which was purely from stress, she knew, but that didn’t stop them itching.

“We need to cure Artemis,” she said, wishing for a free hand to scratch. “I can’t take much more of this.”

The rock face flashed by outside in a confusing meld of grays and deep blue. Ash, pulverized stone, and chunks of debris spiraled down the tunnel wall, further impairing Holly’s vision.

She checked the escape pod’s communications station without much hope.

“Nothing. No contact with Atlantis; we’re still blocked. The probe must have seen us by now. Why no aggressive action?”

Foaly squirmed in a harness built for two-legged creatures. “Oh yes, why no aggressive action? How I long for aggressive action.”

“I live for aggressive action!” thundered Orion squeakily, which was unusual. “Oh, how I pray that dragon will turn ’round that I may smite it.”

“Smite it with what?” wondered Foaly. “Your secret birthmark?”

“Don’t you mock my birthmark, which I may or may not have.”

“Shut up, both of you,” snapped Holly. “The light’s changed. Something is coming.”

Foaly smooshed his cheek against the rear porthole. “Ah yes. I expected that.”

“What did you expect?”

“Well, we must be below sea level by now, so what’s coming would be a great big bit of ocean. Now we’ll see just how well I did design that probe.”

The light bouncing off the tunnel wall had suddenly become dull and flickering, and a huge booming *whoomph* vibrated through the pod’s walls. Even Orion was struck dumb as a solid tube of water surged upward toward them.

Holly knew from her training that she should relax her muscles and ride the impact, but every cell in her body wanted to tense up before contact.

Keep the nose straight, she told herself. Cut through the surface. Underneath is calm.

The water closed around them like a malevolent fist and shook the pod, battering its occupants. Everything that was not bolted down became a missile. A toolbox gave Foaly a nasty welt, and Orion’s forehead was punctured by a fork that left tiny wounds where it had struck.

Holly swore like a sailor as she battled to keep the nose down, fighting the fury of nature, talking to the pod as though it were an unbroken bronco. A rivet pinged from its housing and ricocheted around the cabin, knocking a sliver from the view screen, sending a web of shining cracks crackling across the glass.

Holly winced. “D’Arvit. Not good. Not good.” Orion placed a hand on her shoulder. “At least we take the great adventure together, eh, maiden?”

“Not just yet, we don’t,” Holly said, leveling out the rear flaps and punching the craft through the turmoil into the wide, calm ocean.

The view screen held, for the moment, and Holly glared through it, searching for the probe’s telltale engine glare. For several moments she saw nothing out of place in the Atlantic Ocean, but then south-southwest, down ten fathoms or so, she noticed four glowing blue disks.

“There!” she cried. “I see it.”

“Shouldn’t we head for the nearest shuttle port?” wondered Foaly. “Try to make contact with Haven?”

“No,” replied Holly. “We need to maintain a visual and try to work out where this thing is going. If we lose it, then thanks to *your* stealth ore, it’s lost, with plenty of water to hide in.”

“That’s another jibe, young lady,” said Foaly sulkily. “Don’t think I’m not counting.”

“Counting,” said Orion. “Artemis used to do that.”

“I wish we had Artemis now,” said Holly grimly. “Fives and all. He would know what to do.”

Orion pouted. “But you have me. I can help.”

“Let me guess. Bivouac?” Orion’s face was so desolate that Holly relented. “Okay. Listen, Orion, if you really want to help, keep an eye on the com screen. If we get a signal, let me know.”

“I shall not fail you, fair maiden,” vowed Orion. “This com screen is now my holy grail. I shall wish a signal from its cold heart of wire and capacitors.”

Foaly was about to interject and explain how the communications screen had neither wires nor capacitors, but when he saw the poisonous look Holly was shooting him, the centaur decided to keep his mouth closed.

“And you,” said Holly, in a tone to match her look, “try to figure out how the great Foaly was circumvented so completely, and maybe then we can get control of that probe before anyone else gets hurt.”

That’s another jibe, thought Foaly, but he was wise enough not to say this aloud.

Down and down they went into deeper and darker blue. The probe stuck rigidly to its course, turning aside for neither rock nor reef, seemingly unaware of the tiny escape pod on its tail.

They must see us, thought Holly, pushing the pod to its limits just to keep up. But if the probe had spotted them, it gave no sign, just plowed through the ocean at a constant rate of knots, unswervingly drawing closer to its goal, wherever that was.

Holly had a thought. “Foaly. You have a communicator, don’t you?”

The centaur was sweating in the oxygen-depleted atmosphere, his light blue shirt now mostly dark blue. “Of course I do. I already checked for a signal. Nothing.”

“I know, but what kind of mini-programs do you have on there? Anything for navigation?”

Foaly pulled out his phone and scrolled through the mini-programs. “I do have a nav mi-p. All self-contained, no signal needed.” The centaur did not need to be told what to do: he unstrapped himself from the harness and laid his phone on an omni-sensor on the dash. Its screen was instantly displayed on a small screen in the porthole.

A 3-D compass appeared, and spent a few seconds plotting the pod’s movements, which Holly made sure were mirroring the probe’s course.

“Okay,” said the centaur. “We are locked in. I designed this mi-p, by the way. I earn more from this little wonder than all my LEP work.”

“Just tell me.”

Foaly dragged a little ship icon along its straight line on the screen until it reached the ocean floor. There was a pulsing red circle at the point of impact.

“That circle is pretty,” said Orion.

“Not for long,” said Foaly, paling.

Holly took her eyes off the probe for half a second. “Tell me, Foaly. What’s down there?”

The centaur suddenly felt the full weight of his responsibility. Something he had been repressing since the probe’s . . . *his* probe’s attack.

“Atlantis. My gods, Holly, the probe is headed directly for Atlantis.”

Holly’s eyes swiveled back to the four circles of light. “Can it break through the dome?”

“That’s not what it was designed to do.”

Holly gave him a moment to think about what he had just said.

“Okay, I admit it’s doing a lot of things it wasn’t designed to do.”

“Well, then?”

Foaly made a few calculations on the screen, calculations that Artemis might have understood had he been present.

“It’s possible,” he said. “Nothing of the probe would remain intact. But at this speed it might put a crack in the dome.”

Holly coaxed a little more speed from the pod. “We need to warn Atlantis. Orion, do we have anything on the communications?”

The pod’s human passenger looked up from the screen. “Not a twitter, princess, but *this* light is flashing rather urgently. Does it have a special significance?”

Foaly peered over his shoulder. “The hull must have been breached in the tunnel. We’re running out of oxygen.”

For a second, Holly’s shoulders slumped. “It doesn’t matter. We keep going.”

Foaly cupped both hands around his cranium, holding in the thoughts. “No. Now we try to get outside the probe’s jamming corona. We should run for the surface.”

“What if it changes course?”

“Then it won’t hit Atlantis, and nobody will drown or be crushed. And even if it does swing back around, they’ll be ready for it.”

It went against Holly’s instincts to run. “I feel like we’re deserting those people down there.”

Foaly pointed at the screen. “At that speed, the probe will reach Atlantis in three hours. We’ll run out of oxygen in five minutes. We’ll be unconscious in six, dead in twelve, and no use to anybody.”

“I feel a little dizzy,” said Orion. “But also wonderfully elated. I feel that I am on the verge of finding a rhyme for the word *orange*.”

“Oxygen deprivation,” said Foaly. “Or perhaps it’s just him.”

Holly closed down the throttle. “Can we make it?”

Foaly tapped out a complicated equation. “If we go in the opposite direction right now. Maybe. If whoever is doing this has somehow boosted the jammer, then no.”

“*Maybe* is the best you can do?”

Foaly nodded wearily. “The absolute best.”

Holly swung the pod around with three deft maneuvers. “Best odds I’ve had all day,” she said.

It was a race now, but an unusual one where the competitors were running away from each other. The goal was simple: now that they knew where the probe was headed, Holly had six minutes to pilot the pod out of the jamming corona. Also, it would be nice to have some oxygen to breathe. Luckily, the probe was on a steep descent, so the pod should go on a steep ascent. If they managed to break the surface before the six minutes ran out, then brilliant. They’d broadcast until Haven picked up the signal. If not, since the pod wasn’t equipped with automatic pilot or broadcast facilities, the probe would be on top of the Atlantis security towers before they even noticed it, and another little negative was that they would be dead.

It’s funny, thought Holly. I don’t think my heart rate is up that much. These life-or-death situations have become almost normal for me ever since meeting Artemis Fowl.

She glanced sideways at the romantic who was wearing Artemis’s face, and he caught the look.

“Penny for your thoughts, princess. Though they are worth a king’s ransom.”

“I was wishing that you would go away,” said Holly bluntly. “And return Artemis to us. We need him.”

Orion hummed. “That thought is not as valuable as I had imagined. Why do you want Artemis back? He is nasty and mean to everyone.”

“Because Artemis could get us out of this alive and save the people of Haven and possibly find out who murdered all those LEP officers.”

“I grant you that,” said Orion, miffed. “But his sonnets are heartless, and that opera house he designed was totally self-indulgent.”

“Yep, that’s what we need now,” Foaly chimed in. “Opera-house designing skills.”

“Oh yes, traitorous steed,” said Orion testily. “Probe-designing skills would be much more useful.”

Holly sounded a quick burst on the klaxon for attention. “Excuse me, gentlemen. All this arguing is consuming oxygen, so could we all *please* be quiet?”

“Is that a command, beloved?”

“Yes,” whispered Holly ominously. “It is.”

“Very well. Then quiet it shall be. I would rather cut out my own tongue than utter one more word. I would sooner behead myself with a butter knife than speak a single—”

Holly gave in to a baser instinct and jabbed Orion in the solar plexus.

That was wrong, she thought as the boy drooped in his harness, gasping for breath. I am going to feel guilty about that later.

If there was a later. There was plenty of power in the fuel block, just no air in the tanks and no recycling facility to scrub the carbon dioxide from the exhaled air. The pod was supposed to be a short-term option only. It hadn’t been designed for actual missions; the hull could crack under the pressure of steep ascent long before the fuel ran out.

So many ways to die, thought Holly. Eventually, one of them is going to get us.

The digital depth gauge was spinning backward from 10,000 meters. They were in an Atlantic trench, never before seen by human eyes. Shoals of strange luminous fish swarmed around them, easily keeping pace, butting the hull with the fleshy glowing bulbs in their transparent bellies.

Then the light changed and the fish were gone, darting away so quickly it was as though they had simply dematerialized. In their place were seals and whales and fish like silver arrowheads. A chunk of blue ice rolled past, and Holly saw her mother’s face in its planes and shadows.

Oxygen deprivation, she told herself. That’s all it is.

“How long?” she asked Foaly.

The centaur checked the oxygen levels. “Based on three conscious beings—nervous conscious beings I might add—rapidly consuming the air, we’re going to be short a minute or two.”

“You said we could make it!”

“The hole in the tank is expanding.”

Holly beat her fist on the dash. “D’Arvit, Foaly. Why does it always have to be so hard?”

Foaly spoke calmly. “Holly, my friend. You know what you have to do.”

“No, Foaly. I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

Holly did know. There were three conscious people breathing hard. Foaly alone took in more

oxygen than a bull troll. It only took one person to steer the ship and send the message.

It was a tough choice, but there was no time to agonize over it. She felt for a squat metal cylinder in one of the rings on her belt and pulled it out.

“What’s that, sweetness?” asked Orion, who had just recovered from the belly jab.

Holly answered the question with one of her own. “Would you do anything for me, Orion?”

The boy’s face seemed to light up. “Of course. Absolutely anything.”

“Close your eyes and count to ten.”

Orion was disappointed. “What? No tasks? Not even a dragon to slay?”

“Close your eyes if you love me.”

Orion did so immediately, and Holly prodded him in the neck with a battery-powered Shokker. The electrocuted boy slumped in the harness, two electrode burns smoking gently on his neck.

“Nicely done,” said Foaly nervously. “Not in the neck for me, if you don’t mind.”

Holly checked the Shokker. “Don’t worry. I only had enough charge for one.”

Foaly could not suppress a sigh of relief, and when he glanced guiltily across at Orion, knowing that really he should be the unconscious one, Holly hit him in the flank with the second charge.

Foaly did not even have time to think *You sneaky elf* before slumping in the corner.

“Sorry, guys,” said Holly, then made a silent vow not to speak again until it was time to send the message.

The pod powered toward the surface, its prow slicing through the water. Holly steered through a vast underwater canyon that had developed its own ecology completely safe from human exploitation. She saw huge undulating eels that could crush a bus, strange crabs with glowing shells, and some kind of two-legged creature that disappeared into a crevice before she could get a proper look at it.

She took the most direct line she could through the canyon, finding a rock chimney that allowed her to exit into open sea.

There was still nothing on the communications array. Solidly blocked. She needed to get farther away.

I could really do with some warlock magic right now, Holly thought. If N °1 were here, he could wiggle his runes and turn carbon dioxide into oxygen.

Water, fish, and bubbles flashed past the window, and could that be a shaft of light from the surface? Had the craft reached the photic zone?

Holly tried the radio again. She heard static this time, but maybe with some chatter inside it.

Good, she thought, but her head was fuzzy. Did I imagine that?

No, you heard it all right, said the unconscious Foaly. *Did I ever tell you about my kids?*

Oxygen deprivation. That’s all it was.

Why did you shoot me, sweetness? wondered passed-out Orion. *Did I displease you?*

It’s too late. Too late.

Holly was shaking now. She filled her lungs but was not satisfied with the foul air. The pod walls suddenly became concave, bending in to crush her.

“It’s not happening,” she called, breaking her vow of silence.

She checked the coms again. Some signal now. There were definitely words among the static.

Enough to transmit?

One way to find out. Holly tapped through her options on the dashboard readout and selected transmit only to be informed that the external antenna was not available. The computer advised her to

check the connection. Holly pressed her face to the starboard and saw that the connection was pretty well defunct, as the entire thing had been knocked out of its housing by one impact or another.

Why doesn't this tug bucket, Stone Age piece of junk have an internal antenna? Even glooping phones have internal antennae.

Phones! Of course.

Holly punched the harness-release button on her chest and dropped to her knees. She slid along the deck, moving toward Foaly.

It smells bad down here. Stale air.

For a second, one of the handrails grew a snake's head and hissed at her.

Your time is running out, it said. Your odds are short, Short.

Don't listen to the snake, said Foaly, without moving his lips. He's just bitter because his soul is stuck in a handrail because of some stuff that happened in a previous life.

I still love you, said sleeping Orion, breathing slow and steady, using hardly any oxygen.

I am really going insane this time, thought Holly.

Holly pulled herself along Foaly's frame, reaching into his shirt pocket for his phone. The centaur never went anywhere without his precious phone, and was proud of its modified clunkiness.

I love that phone, said Foaly proudly. Over five hundred mi-p's. All my own design. I did a nice one called Offspring. Say you find the love of your life: all you need to do is take a photo of you and your beloved, and Offspring will show you what your potential kids will look like.

Fascinating. I hope we get to talk about it for real sometime.

The phone was switched on, so there was no need for a password, although knowing Foaly as she did, Holly supposed that his password would be some version of his own name. His screen was a crazy jumble of mi-p's that probably made sense if you were a centaur.

The problem with all these applications is that sometimes a person just wants to make a quick call. Where's the phone icon?

Then the icons started waving at her. "Pick me," they chorused. "Over here." *That's not a hallucination, said passed-out Foaly proudly.*

Those little guys are animated.

"Phone," Holly shouted into the communicator's microphone, hoping for voice control. To her relief, a blurry old-fashioned cone phone icon expanded to fill the screen.

It's not actually blurry. My eyesight's fading.

"Call Police Plaza," she ordered the icon.

The phone ticked for a moment, then asked. "Do you wish to call Phil's Pizza?"

"No. Call Police Plaza."

The water rushing by was definitely more azure now, shot through with bubbles and bending streaks of light.

"Do you wish to call Police Plaza?"

"Yes," gasped Holly. "Yes, I do."

There was more jostling as the pod passed through the surface disturbance and was flipped by the waves.

"Connecting you with Police Plaza."

The phone hummed gently as it tried to connect, then said in a comically sad voice: "Boo-hoo. You don't have a strong enough signal. Would you like to record a message for me to send just as

soon as the signal is strong enough?"

"Yes," croaked Holly.

"Did you say *yikes*? Because *yikes* is not an appropriate response in this situation."

Holly composed herself. "Yes. I would like to compose a message."

"Great," said the phone brightly. "Start recording after the bell, and remember good manners don't cost anything, so always introduce yourself and say good-bye."

Say good-bye, thought Holly. Funny.

Holly recorded a concise message containing as few coughs and splutters as possible, identifying herself, as the phone had suggested, and also identifying the threat heading toward Atlantis. Almost as soon as she had finished, Holly collapsed on her back, flopping weakly like a stranded fish. There were spots before her eyes, which grew larger and became pale circles, crowding together, obscuring her vision. She did not see the colors outside the porthole change from blue to green to the dull, pearlescent white of a northern sky.

She did not hear the pressure vents pop, or feel cool air flooding the cabin, and Captain Holly Short did not know that fifteen minutes after the pod surfaced, her message to Police Plaza would finally be transmitted and be acted upon *almost* immediately.

It would have been acted upon immediately had not the sprite on the switchboard, a certain Chix Verbil, initially believed that the message was a prank call from his poker buddy, Crooz, made to make fun of his nasally voice.

Chix only decided to pass the message on to Commander Trouble Kelp when it occurred to him that there could be a career downside to ignoring the warning that could have saved Atlantis.

"I like your attitude," said Tombstone.

The Deeps, Atlantis; Now

Turnball Root was busy pretending to be busy working on his model of the *Nostremius* aquanaut, so that he would appear all the more innocent when they came to get him, which he was certain they would very shortly.

Pretending to be busy takes more energy than simply being busy, Turnball realized, and this cheered him tremendously, as it was a witty observation and just the kind of thing that his eventual biographers would pick up on. But witty observations must now take a backseat to the plan. After all, witty observations would be far more enjoyable when he had someone else besides Vishby to listen to them. Leonor adored his little comments and often wrote them in her diary. Turnball's eyes lost their focus, and his hands froze in space as he remembered their first summer together on that beautiful island in the Pacific. She, boyish in her vest and jodhpurs, he handsome and rakish in his LEP dress jacket.

"This can never work, Captain. How can it possibly work? I am human, after all, and you are most certainly not."

And quick as a flash, he took her hands in his and said: "Love can break down any barriers. Love and magic."

That was when he made her love him.

Leonor jumped a little but didn't remove her hands.

"I felt a spark, Turnball," she said.

He joked, "I felt it too," then explained, "Static electricity, that always happens to me."

Leonor believed it and fell for her captain.

She would have loved me soon enough anyway, thought Turnball crossly. I simply hurried the process.

But he knew in his heart that he had bolstered Leonor's emotions with magic, and now that she was so far beyond her natural end, his hold on her was slipping.

Without magic, will she love me as I love her? he wondered a thousand times a day, and knew that he was terrified to find out.

To keep his vital signs steady, Turnball turned his thoughts once more to his thrall, Mr. Vishby.

Vishby was undeniably a repulsive dolt, and yet Turnball Root had a soft spot for the lad, and would perhaps even decide to let him live when this was all over, or at least kill him quickly. Of all the great schemes and impossible heists that Turnball had been involved in as a crooked cop, fugitive, or inmate, the simple-sounding act of turning Vishby had been the most ambitious. It had required perfect timing, audacity, and months of grooming. Turnball often thought of this plan, which he had set into motion almost four years previously. . . .

It wasn't as if Vishby were a human with an already treacherous and self-serving nature. Vishby was a fairy, and most fairies, with the exception of goblins, were just not inclined toward the criminal life. Common lawbreakers, like that Diggums character, were common enough, but intelligent, foresighted criminals were rare.

Vishby's downfall was that he was a moaner, and as the months had rolled by, he'd gradually let down his guard with Turnball Root and told him all about his demotion following Mulch Diggums's escape. He'd also expressed a bitterness toward the LEP for the reprimand and wished he could do something to get back at them.

Turnball saw his chance—his first real chance of escape since his arrest. He'd formulated a plan to recruit Vishby.

The first stage was to feign sympathy for the water elf, whereas in reality, had he been in charge, he would have flushed him out of an airlock for his performance in the Diggums episode.

I so enjoy our chats, he had said. How I wish we could talk more freely.

Vishby had clammed up immediately, remembering that every word was on tape.

On his next visit, Vishby had entered with a smug tilt to his fishy head, and Turnball knew his plan would succeed.

I switched off your mike, the prison warder had said. Now we can talk about whatever we like.

And then Turnball knew that he had him. All it would take was a little Turnball Root magic to make Vishby his slave.

Except that Turnball Root didn't have magic. That was the one irrevocable price that criminals paid: loss of magic, forever. This was one forfeit that there was no coming back from, and exiled criminals had been trying for centuries. They bought potions, tried spells, chanted in the moonlight, slept upside down, bathed in centaur dung. Nothing worked. Once you had broken the fairy rules, your magic was gone. It was partly a psychological thing, but mostly it was the result of age-old warlock hexes that successive administrations did not feel like unlocking.

This denial of his basic fairy rights had always irked Turnball, and during his years as a fugitive he had spent a fortune on dozens of witch doctors and quacks who all claimed they could have him running hot, brimful of magic, if only he would take this potion or recite that spell backward in the dead of night while holding a grumpy frog. Nothing worked. Nothing until, a century ago, Turnball found an exiled sprite living in Ho Chi Minh City who had somehow managed to maintain a tiny spark of power, just enough to remove the occasional wart. For a huge price, which Turnball would have paid a million times over, she revealed her secret:

Mandrake root and rice wine. It won't bring the sweet magic back, Captain, but each time you partake of these two, they'll give you a spark. One hot spark at a time and that is all. Use this little trick wisely, my Captain, or the spark won't be there when you most need it.

This pearl from an alcoholic sprite.

It was a trick he'd used in the past, but not since his arrest. Until now. And so for his birthday that year, Turnball had requested a dinner of puffer fish with fo-fo berries and mandrake shavings, followed by a carafe of rice wine and sim-coffee. This request was accompanied by the revelation of the whereabouts of a notorious group of arms smugglers, which would be quite a feather in the warden's cap. Tarpon Vinyáya agreed to the request. When Vishby arrived with the meal, Turnball invited him to stay and talk. And while they chatted, Turnball picked at his meal, eating only the mandrake shavings and drinking only the wine, all the time subtly reinforcing Vishby's opinion of the LEP.

Yes, my dear Vishby, they are unfeeling louts. I mean, what were you to do? That thug Diggums left you no option but to flee.

And when the moment was right, when Turnball felt a single spark of magic coalesce in his gut, he rested his hand lightly on Vishby's shoulder, allowing his little finger to touch the water elf's bare neck.

Usually neck touching is no big deal. Wars have rarely been fought over a neck touch, but this touch was malicious. For on the pad of his finger, Turnball had painted, in his own blood, a black-magic thrall rune. Turnball was a great believer in runes. Ideally, for maximum effectiveness, the person having the spell cast on them would be spread-eagled on a granite plinth, doused in oil fermented from the tears of unicorns, and tattooed from head to foot with symbols, and then given at least three minutes of magic full in the face. But you make do with what you have and hope for the best.

So Turnball touched Vishby on the neck and transferred his single spark of magic through the contact.

Vishby slapped his neck as if stung. "Ow! Hey, what was that? I felt a spark, Turnball."

Turnball quickly withdrew his hand. "Static electricity. That always happens around me. My mother was afraid to kiss me. Here, Vishby, have some of this wine to make up for the shock."

Vishby eyed the contents of the carafe greedily. Alcoholic beverages were not usually allowed in the prison, as with prolonged use they cause the magical receptors to atrophy. But some fairies, much like humans, cannot resist what is bad for them.

"I'm your fairy," he said, eagerly accepting a cup.

Yes, Turnball thought. Yes, you are now.

Turnball knew it would work. It had before, on stronger minds than Vishby's.

And so Vishby found that he could never say no to Turnball Root. It started out with simple harmless requests: an extra blanket, some reading material not in the prison system. But soon Vishby found himself inextricably bound up in Turnball's escape plans, and what was more, he didn't seem to mind being involved. It seemed the sensible thing to do.

Over the following four years, Vishby had gone from guard to accomplice. He had made contact with several inmates who were still loyal to Turnball and prepared them for the great escape. He made several raids on what was then Kobo Laboratory and used his security code to access their sensitive recycling plant, where he found, among other things, the scrambler wafer and the infinitely more valuable control orb for the Mars probe. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Vishby knew that eventually someone would find out about these thefts, but he couldn't seem to make himself care.

Most of what he had found at Koboï Labs was of absolutely no use or was too far gone to be fixed, but the control orb needed only a slight descaling and the insertion of a new omni-sensor. These were such simple tasks that Vishby, at Turnbull's request, did them at home, with a little webcam supervision, naturally.

Once Turnbull had a working original control orb in his possession, it was a relatively simple matter to sync with the Mars probe before take-off and begin the arduous task of reprogramming its mission parameters. This was not a task he could complete before the spacecraft actually left the Earth, but off the top of his head he could think of a dozen ways a rogue spaceship might prove useful. But not on Mars.

Mars? Oh no, no, Leonor. That's too far away, and of no use to me. Let's wait until it takes off on its mission and then turn this big fellow around.

His original plan for the probe had been simplicity itself: use it as a very big and very loud distraction on its return from Mars. But, as Leonor's communications became terser and somehow colder, Turnbull realized that he would have to accelerate his schedule and refine his plot. It was vital that he escape, but it was even more important that he strengthen his hold over Leonor before her humanity completely reasserted itself. Her aging was now so rapid that it would take some very special magic to reverse it. And there was only one place to get such magic. If Julius had been alive, Turnbull would have worried about his little brother stumbling into his deception, but even with Julius gone, there was still the entire LEP to worry about. He needed to damage the force, cut off the head of the snake, and maybe its tail too.

And so Turnbull monitored Warden Vinyáya's communications, using the password Vishby had stolen for him. He was especially interested in the calls to the warden's sister, Commander Raine Vinyáya of the LEP.

The snake's head.

Commander Vinyáya was a hard fairy to kill, especially if your weapon was a blunt instrument in space, and the commander seemed reluctant to go topside, where she was vulnerable.

And then, only last month, she had made a video call to her brother informing him, in giddy tones, that she would never allow anyone else to hear of her trip to Iceland to meet the Mud Whelp Artemis Fowl. Apparently the boy was planning to save the world.

The infamous Artemis Fowl, Commander Vinyáya, and Holly Short too, together in one place. Perfect.

Turnball had activated his control orb and fed an entirely new set of mission parameters to the Mars probe, parameters that the probe never even questioned because they came from its own orb. To paraphrase: *Come back to Earth and crush the commander and as many of her elite team as possible. Crush them, then burn them, then electrocute the cinders.*

What fun.

Then there was Artemis Fowl. He had heard of the boy, and by all accounts, this particular human was a little brighter than most. Better to study up a little just in case the human had a little treachery planned himself. Turnbull used the warden's code to access the LEP surveillance feed from more than two hundred camera bugs planted in Fowl Manor and found to his utter delight that Artemis Fowl seemed to be developing Atlantis Complex.

Atlantis is the magic word for this mission, he thought.

Turnball was equally concerned about the Mud Boy's gigantic bodyguard, who seemed just the kind of person to hunt down and kill his master's murderer.

The famous Butler. The man who had taken down a troll.

Luckily, Artemis himself took Butler out of play when his paranoia flared up, and he invented a reason to send the bodyguard to Mexico.

Even though it complicated his plans a little, Turnball decided to have a little fun with the Butlers, just to cut off any vengeful loose ends.

I know you would not approve of all these deaths, Leonor, Turnball thought as he sat at his computer, sending instructions through to Vishby's terminal. But they are necessary if we are to be together forever. Those people are unimportant compared to our eternal love. And you will never know the price of our happiness. All you will know is that we are reunited.

But in truth, Turnball knew that he enjoyed all the machinations tremendously and was almost sorry to send the kill orders. Almost but not quite. Even better than scheming would be all the time to be spent with Leonor, and it had been too long since he had seen his wife's beautiful face.

So he'd sent the kill orders to the probe and loaded up on mandrake and rice wine.

Luckily, it only took the barest spark of magic to *mesmerize* humans.

Because they are weak-willed and stupid. But funny, like monkeys.

When Vishby arrived on that final day in prison, Turnball was sitting on his hands, trying hard to contain his excitement.

"Ah, Mr. Vishby," he said when the door dissolved. "You're early. Is there some irregularity I should be concerned about?"

Vishby's impassive fish face was a little more emotional than usual. "The warden's sister is dead. Commander Vinyaya and a whole shuttle of LEP blown apart. Did we do that?"

Turnball licked the blood rune on his finger. "Whether we did or not is unimportant. You shouldn't be concerned."

Vishby absently fingered his neck, where a faint outline of the rune still glowed. "I'm not concerned. Why should I be? It was nothing to do with us."

"Good. Fabulous. I imagine we have bigger fish to fry."

Vishby flinched at the fish reference.

"Oh. Oops, sorry, Mr. Vishby. I should be more sensitive. Come now, tell me, what news?" Vishby flapped his gills for a moment, getting the sentences together in his head. Captain Root did not like stammering.

"There's a space probe heading directly for Atlantis, so we have to evacuate the city. It's likely that the craft won't actually penetrate the dome, but the Council can't take the chance. I've been called up to pilot a shuttle, and you're one of my . . . eh . . . p-passengers."

Turnball sighed, disappointed. "Oh . . . p-passengers? Really?" Vishby rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Captain. Passengers, of course, one of my passengers."

"It's so unprofessional, the stammering."

"I know," said Vishby. "I'm working on it. I bought one of those . . . eh . . . au-audio books. I'm nervous now."

Turnball decided to go easy on Vishby; there would be plenty of time for discipline later when he was killing the water elf. The ultimate punishment.

"It's only natural," he said magnanimously. "First day back in the pilot's chair. Then there's this mysterious probe, plus you have to transport all of us dangerous prisoners."

Vishby seemed even more nervous. "Exactly. Well, the thing is . . . I don't want to do this, Turnball, but . . ."

“But you have to cuff me,” finished Turnball. “Of course. I understand completely.” He thrust out his hands with wrists upturned. “It’s not as if you have to fasten the cuffs, is it?”

Vishby blinked and touched his neck. “No. Why would I fasten them? That would be barbaric.”

The water elf laid a set of standard ultralight plastic polymer cuffs across Turnball’s wrist.

“Comfy?” he asked.

Again, Turnball was feeling generous. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. You concentrate on the shuttle.”

“Thanks, Captain. This is a big day for me.”

As Vishby dissolved the door, Turnball was struck by how the guard’s subconscious dealt with betraying all that he believed in. Vishby simply pretended that everything was as it should be, until the moment when it was not. The water elf somehow managed to keep two lives running simultaneously side by side.

Amazing what a person will do to avoid guilt, thought Turnball, following Vishby through the doorway and taking his first breath of free recycled air in years.

Atlantis was a small city by human standards. With barely ten thousand residents, it wouldn’t even qualify as a city to the Mud Men, but to the fairies it was their second center of government and culture, the first being the capital, Haven City. There was a growing lobby to demolish Atlantis altogether, as the upkeep cost a fortune in taxpayers’ money and it was only a matter of time before the humans sank one of their submarine drones in the right spot and got a shot of the dome. But the budget for such a massive relocation and demolition project was so huge that continued maintenance always seemed the more attractive option to the politicians. It was more expensive in the long term, but the politicians reasoned that by the time the *long term* came around, somebody else would be in office.

Vishby led Turnball Root along a corridor tube with Perspex walling through which he could see dozens of crafts lining up at the various dome pressure-lock tollgates, waiting to swipe their credit chips for exit. There didn’t seem to be any panic. And why would there be? The Atlanteans had been preparing for a dome breach ever since the last one, more than eight thousand years ago, when an asteroid had superheated a two-mile-long tube of ocean before spending its last gasp of energy knocking a crunchball-sized chunk out of the dome, which in those days had not been shatterproof. In less than an hour the entire city had been submerged with more than five thousand casualties. It had taken a hundred years or so to build the new Atlantis on top of the foundations supplied by the ruins of the old Atlantis, and this time an evacuation strategy had featured large in the city blueprints. All of which meant that in case of emergency, every male, female, and child fairy could be out of the city in less than an hour. Drills were held every week, and in nursery school the first rhyme every student learned was:

The blue dome

Protects our home;

If it should crack,

Prepare for evac.

Turnball Root recalled this ditty as he followed Vishby along the corridor.

Crack, evac? What kind of rhyme was that? Evac wasn’t even a real word, just a military contraction. Exactly the kind of word Julius might have used.

I am so glad Leonor never had to endure meeting my boorish brother. If she had, no amount of magical persuasion could have enticed her to marry me.

A part of Turnball knew that he kept Leonor away from the People in general because a ten-minute conversation with any fairy under the world would have shown Leonor that her husband was not quite the noble revolutionary that he pretended to be. Luckily, this was a part of himself that Turnball had become quite adept at ignoring.

Other prisoners were shambling from their cells across narrow bridges onto the main walkway. Each was shackled and dressed in a lime green Deeps prison jumpsuit. Most were laying on the bravado, rolling swaggers and obvious sneers, but Turnball knew from experience that it was the ones with the placid gazes you had to worry about. Those ones were beyond caring.

“Come on now, convicts,” called a particularly Cro-Magnon-looking jumbo pixie, a breed that sometimes popped up in Atlantis due to the pressurized environment. “Keep moving there. Don’t make me buzz you.”

At least I am wearing my full dress uniform, thought Turnball, ignoring the guard, but he did not feel much consoled. Uniform or no, he was being paraded down this walkway like a common prisoner. He soothed himself with the decision that he would definitely kill Vishby as soon as possible and maybe send an e-mail to Leeta, congratulating Vishby’s sweetheart on her new single status. She would probably be delighted.

Vishby raised a fist, bringing the procession to a halt at an intersection. The prisoners were forced to wait like cattle while a large metal cube, secured with titanium bands, was floated past them on a hover trolley.

“Opal Koboï,” explained Vishby. “She’s so dangerous they’re not even letting her out of her cell.”

Turnball bristled. *Opal Koboï*. People down here spent their days gossiping about Opal Koboï. The current rumor was that there was another Opal Koboï around somewhere who had come out of the past to rescue herself in the present. People might get more done if they stopped obsessing over Opal-blooming-Koboï. If anyone should be concerned about Koboï, it was Turnball. After all, she had murdered his little brother. Then again, better not. Dwelling on the past could cause his ulcer to return.

It took the cube an age to float by, and Turnball counted three doors on the side.

Three doors. My cell has a single door. Why does Koboï need a cell so big that it has three doors?

It didn’t matter. He would be out of here soon enough and then he could treat himself like royalty.

Leonor and I shall return to the island where we first met so dramatically.

As soon as the intersection was clear, Vishby led them on toward their shuttle bay. Through the clear plastic, Turnball noticed crowds of civilians walking briskly but without apparent panic toward their own rescue pods. On the upper levels, groups of Atlantis’s more affluent citizens strolled to private evacuation shuttles that probably cost more than Turnball could steal in a week.

Ruffles are back in, Turnball noted with some pleasure. I knew it.

The corridor opened out into a loading bay, where groups of prisoners were waiting impatiently by air locks that opened directly on to the sea.

“This is all so unnecessary,” said Vishby. “The water cannons are going to blast this probe thing to smithereens.

We’ll all be back here in a few minutes.” Not all of us, thought Turnball, not bothering to conceal a smile. Some of us are never coming back.

And he knew in that instant that it was true. Even if his plan failed, he was never coming back here. One way or another, Turnball Root would be free.

Vishby beeped the shuttle door with his keys, and the manacled prisoners filed inside. Once they were seated, Vishby activated carnival-ride-style safety bars, which also acted as very effective restraints. The convicts were pinned to their seats, still cuffed. Totally helpless.

“You got ’em, Fishby?” asked the Cro-Magnon pixie.

“Yes, I got ’em. And the name’s Vishby!”

Turnball smirked. Office bullying; another reason he had been able to turn Vishby so easily.

“That’s what I said, Frisbee. Now, why don’t you pilot this bucket out of here and let me keep watch on these scary convicts?”

Vishby bristled. “Just you wait a minute . . .”

Turnball Root did not have time for a showdown. “That’s an excellent idea, Mr. Vishby. You put that pilot’s licence to good use and let your colleague here watch over us scary convicts.”

Vishby touched his neck. “Sure. Why not? I should get us out of here like I’m supposed to.”

“Exactly. You know it makes sense.”

“Go on, Fishboy,” scoffed the big guard, whose name tag had been altered to read k-max. “Do what the convict tells you.”

Vishby sat at the controls and ran a brisk prelaunch, whistling softly through his gills to shut out K-Max’s jibes.

This K-Max fellow doesn’t realize how much trouble he’s in, thought Turnball, the idea pleasing him tremendously. He felt *empowered*.

“Excuse me, Mr. K-Max, is it?”

K-Max squinted in what he thought was a threatening fashion, but the actual effect was to make him seem shortsighted and perhaps constipated. “That’s right, prisoner. K to the Max. The king of maximum security.”

“Oh, I see. A sobriquet. How romantic of you.”

K-Max twirled his buzz baton. “There ain’t nothing romantic about me, Root. You ask my three ex-wives. I am here to cause discomfort and that is all.”

“Oops,” said Turnball playfully. “Sorry I spoke.”

This little exchange gave Vishby a chance to get the shuttle out of the dock and one of the shuttle’s other occupants a moment to orientate himself and realize that his old leader was about to make his move. In fact, of the twelve rough-and-ready specimens locked down behind the shuttle’s security bars, ten had served under Turnball at one time or another, and most had done very nicely by it, until their capture. Once Vishby had been reactivated, he had easily ensured that these prisoners were allocated seats.

It will be nice for the captain to have friends around him in a time of crisis, he reasoned.

The most important *friend* was the sprite Unix B’lob, who sat directly across the vulcanized walkway from Turnball. Unix was a grounded sprite with cauterized nubs where his wings should be. Turnball had dragged Unix out of a troll pit, and the sprite had served as his right-hand fairy ever since. He was the best kind of lieutenant, as he never questioned orders. Unix did not justify or prioritize: he was equally prepared to die fetching Turnball a coffee as he was stealing a nuclear warhead.

Turnball winked at his subordinate to let him know that today was the day. Unix did not react, but then he rarely did, icy indifference being his attitude toward pretty much everything.

Cheer up, Unix, old man, Turnball longed to call. Death and mayhem will shortly follow.

But he had to content himself with the wink for the moment.

Vishby was nervous, and it showed. The shuttle sputtered forward in lurchy hops, scraping a fender along the docking jetty.

“Nice going, Vishby,” snarled K-Max. “Are you trying to crush us before the probe does it?”

Vishby flushed, and gripped the rudder stick so tightly his knuckles glowed green.

“It’s okay. I’ve got it now. No problems.”

The shuttle edged from the shelter of the massive curved fins that funneled the worst of the underwater currents away from the dome, and Turnball enjoyed the receding view of new Atlantis. The cityscape was a murky jumble of traditional spires and minarets alongside more modern glass-and-steel pyramids. Hundreds of slatted filter pods sat at the corners of the giant polymer pentagons that slotted together to form the protective dome over Atlantis.

If the probe hit a filter pod, the dome could go, thought Turnball; and then, Oh, look, they used schoolchildren’s designs to decorate the fins. How fun.

Out they went, past the water cannons, which were erect in their cradles, just waiting for coordinates.

Farewell, my probe, thought Turnball. You have served me well and I shall miss you.

A flotilla fled the threatened city: pleasure craft and city shuttles, troop carriers and prisoner transporters, all flitting toward the ten-mile marker where the brainiacs assured them the shock wave would dissipate to the merest ripple. And though the flight seemed chaotic, it was not. Each and every craft had a marker to dock with at the ten-mile circle.

Vishby was growing in confidence and quickly navigated the gloomy depths toward their marker, only to find that a giant squid had latched on to the pulsing buoy, pecking at its glowing beacon.

The water elf turned the shuttle’s exhaust on the creature, and it scooted off in a flurry of rippling tentacles. Vishby let the auto-dock take over, lowering the shuttle onto its magnetic docking buoy.

K-Max laughed scornfully. “You shouldn’t shoot at your cousins, Fishboy. You won’t get invited to family functions.”

Vishby pounded the dash. “I have had enough of you!”

“Me too,” said Turnball, and reached out, casually pinching K-Max’s buzz baton from his belt. He could have shocked the jumbo sprite immediately, but he wanted him to realize what was going on. It took a while.

“Hey,” said K-Max. “What are you—? You just took my . . .” And then the lightbulb moment. “You aren’t cuffed.”

“What a bright boy,” said Turnball, and thrust the buzz baton into K-Max’s gut, sending ten thousand volts crackling through the pixie’s body. The guard jittered on point like a possessed classical dancer, then collapsed in a boneless-looking heap.

“You shocked my fellow officer,” said Vishby dully, “which should upset me, but I am okay with it, more than okay, actually, even though you can’t tell by my tone of voice.”

Turnball shot Unix another wink that said, *Watch your genius boss at work.*

“You don’t need to feel anything, Mr. Vishby. All you need to do is release bars three and six.”

“Just three and six? Don’t you want to release all your friends? You have been lonely for so long, Turnball.”

Bars three and six popped up, and Turnball rose, luxuriously stretching his legs, as though he had been seated for an age.

“Not just yet, Mr. Vishby. Some of my friends may have forgotten me.”

Unix was also freed, and went immediately to work, stripping K-Max of his boots and belt. He shrugged off the top half of his own jumpsuit and tied it off at his waist, so the scar tissue of his wing nubs could get a little air.

Turnball felt a twinge of unease. Unix was a disturbing fellow, loyal unto death, but strange

beyond strange. He could have had those wing nubs carved down by a plastidoc, but he preferred to wear them like trophies.

If he ever shows the smallest sign of disloyalty, I will have to put him down like a dog. No hesitation.

“Everything all right, Unix?”

The pale sprite nodded curtly, then continued to frisk K-Max’s person.

“Very well,” said Turnball, taking center stage for his big speech. “Gentlemen, we are on the brink of what the press often refers to as *an audacious prison break*. Some of us will survive and, unfortunately, some won’t. The good news is that the choice is yours.”

“I choose to survive,” said Ching Mayle, a gruff goblin with bite marks on his skull, and muscles up to his ears.

“Not so fast, Mayle. A leap of faith is involved.”

“You can count on me, Captain.”

This from Bobb Ragby, a dwarf fitted with an extra restraint in the form of a mouth ring. He had fought at Turnball’s behest in many a skirmish, including the fateful one on the Tern Islands, where Julius Root and Holly Short had finally arrested Turnball.

Turnball flicked Bobb’s mouth ring, making it ping.

“Can I, Mr. Ragby, or has prison made you soft? Do you still have the gumption?”

“Just take this ring off and find out. I will swallow that guard whole.”

“Which guard?” asked Vishby, nervous in spite of the thrall rune that pulsed at his throat.

“Not you, Vishby,” said Turnball soothingly. “Mr. Ragby didn’t mean you, did you, Mr. Ragby?”

“I did, actually.”

Turnball’s fingers flew to his mouth. “How troubling. I am conflicted, Mr. Vishby. You have done me no little service, but Bobb Ragby there wants to eat you, and that would be entertaining, plus he gets grumpy if we don’t feed him.”

Vishby wanted to be terrified, to take some radical action, but the rune on his neck forbade any emotion stronger than mild anxiety. “Please, Turnball, Captain. I thought we were friends.”

Turnball Root considered this. “You are a traitor to your people, Vishby. How can I take a traitor for a friend?”

Even a magic-doped Vishby could see the irony in this. After all, had not Turnball Root betrayed his kind on numerous occasions, even sacrificing members of the criminal fraternity for creature comforts in his cell?

“But your model parts,” he objected weakly. “And the computer. You gave the names of—”

Turnball did not like how this conversation was going and so took two quick steps and buzzed Vishby in the gills. The water elf fell sideways on the pilot seat and hung in his harness, arms dangling, gills rippling.

“Jabber jabber jabber,” said Turnball brightly. “All these guards are the same. Always sticking it to the cons, eh, my boyos?”

Unix spun Vishby’s chair around and began a thorough search, taking anything of potential use, even a small pack of indigestion tablets, because you never knew.

“Here’s the choice, gentlemen,” said Turnball to his captive audience. “Step outside with me now, or stay and wait for an assault charge to be added to your sentence.”

“Just step outside?” said Bobb Ragby, half chuckling.

Turnball smiled easily, charming as a devil. “That’s it, lads. We step outside into the water.”

“I read something about there being pressure underwater.”

“I heard that too,” said Ching Mayle, licking an eyeball. “Won’t we be crushed?”

Turnball shrugged, milking his moment. “Trust me, lads. It’s all about trust. If you don’t trust me, stay here and rot. I need men with me I can rely on, especially with what I’ve got planned. Think of this as a test.”

There were several groans. Captain Root had always had a thing for tests. It wasn’t enough to be a murderous marauder—a person had to pass all these tests. Once he had made the entire group eat raw stink worms just to prove that they were prepared to obey any order, however ludicrous. The hideaway’s plumbing had taken quite a battering that weekend.

Ching Mayle scratched the bite marks on his crown. “Those are our choices? Stay here or step outside?”

“Succinctly put, Mr. Mayle. Sometimes a limited vocabulary can be an advantage.”

“Can we think about it?”

“Of course, take all the time you need,” said Turnball magnanimously. “So long as your cogitations do not take more than two minutes.”

Ching frowned. “My cogitations can take hours, especially if I have red meat.”

Most fairies found animal flesh disgusting, but every enclave had its omnivorous faction.

“Two minutes? Seriously, Captain?”

“No.”

Bobb Ragby would have wiped his brow if he could have reached it. “Thank goodness.”

“One hundred seconds now. Come on, gents. Ticktock.”

Unix rose from his search and stood wordlessly at Turnball’s side.

“That’s one. Who else is willing to place their lives in my hands?”

Ching nodded. “I reckon, yes. You did good by me,

Captain. I never even smelled fresh air till I cast my lot with you.”

“Count me in,” said Bobb Ragby, rattling his bar. “I’m scared, Captain. I won’t deny it, but I would rather die a pirate than go back to the Deeps.”

Turnball raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Ragby’s voice was guttural with fear. “And what, Captain? I said I’d step outside.”

“It’s your motivation, Mr. Ragby. I need more than a reluctance to go back to prison.”

Ragby banged his head on the restraining bar. “More? I want to go with you, Captain. Honest I do. I swear it. I never met a leader like you.”

“Really? I don’t know. You seem reluctant.”

Ragby was not the sharpest spine on the hedgehog, but his gut told him that going with the captain was a lot safer than staying here. Turnball Root was famous for dealing with evidence and witnesses in a severe fashion. There was a legend going around the fairy fugitive bars that the captain had once burned down an entire shopping complex just to get rid of a thumbprint that he may have left behind in a booth at Falafel Fabulosity.

“I ain’t reluctant, Captain. Take me, please. I’m your faithful Ragby. Who was it that shot that fairy on Tern Mór? It were me. Good old Bobb.”

Turnball wiped an imaginary tear from one eye. “Your pathetic pleadings move me, dear Bobby. Very well, Unix, release Mistfers Ragby and Ching.”

The mutilated sprite did so, then popped Vishby’s harness and hoisted him upright.

“The turncoat?” said Unix.

Turnball started at the sound of Unix’s reptilian voice. He realized that in all their time together he probably hadn’t heard the sprite speak more than a hundred words.

“No. Leave him. Rice wine turns my stomach.”

Other lieutenants might have requested an explanation on this point, but not Unix, who never wanted to know stuff he didn’t need to know and even that information was ejected from his brain as soon as it outlived its usefulness. The sprite simply nodded, then tossed Vishby aside like a sack of refuse.

Ragby and Ching stood quickly, as though repulsed by their seats.

“I feel funny,” said the goblin, worming his little finger into one of the tooth marks on his bald skull. “Good ’cos I’m free, but a little bad too ’cos I might be about to die.”

“You never did have much of a filter between your brain and mouth, Mr. Mayle,” moaned Turnball. “Never mind, I’m the one paid to think.” He faced the remaining prisoners. “Anybody else? Twenty seconds left.”

Four hands went up. Two belonging to the same person, who was desperate not to be left behind.

“Too late,” said Turnball, and gestured for his three chosen acolytes to stand by him. “Come closer; we need a group hug.”

Hugging was not a habit anyone who knew Turnball Root would ever associate with him. The captain had once shot an elf for suggesting a high five, and so it was an effort for Bobb and Ching to keep the shock from their faces. Even Unix raised a jagged eyebrow.

“Oh, come now, gentlemen, am I as scary as all that?”

Yes, Bobb wanted to scream. *You are scarier than a dwarf mom with a long-handled spoon.* But instead he twisted his mouth into something approximating a smile and stepped into Turnball’s embrace. Unix drew close too, as did Ching.

“Aren’t we the strange bunch?” said Turnball cheerily. “Honestly, Unix. It’s like hugging a plank. And you, Mr. Ragby, you really smell very bad. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Ragby mumbled an admittance. “A few. Me dad, all those who were my mates.”

“I’m not the first, then, thank goodness. I don’t mind confirming bad news, but I hate to break it.”

Bobb Ragby wanted to cry: for some reason this inane chatter was terrifying.

A rumble rolled through the metal skin of the shuttle. The noise grew rapidly louder until it filled the small space. From nothing to everything in five seconds.

“Two minutes are up,” shouted Turnball. “Time for the faithful to go outside.”

The hull above the small group’s heads glowed red suddenly, as something melted it from the outside. Several alarms pulsed into life on the view screen’s heads-up display.

“Wow,” shouted Turnball. “Total chaos all of a sudden. What could be going on?”

The section overhead was molten now, and it should have dripped down on the group, searing their flesh, but somehow it was siphoned off. Blob by white-hot blob, a large circle of the roof was sucked away until there was nothing holding the sea out except some kind of gel.

“Should we hold our breath?” asked Bobb Ragby, trying not to sob.

“Not much point, really,” answered Turnball, who loved toying with people.

It’s nice to know more than everybody else, he thought. Then four amorphobots, who had merged into one large gelatinous blob, dropped a fat tentacle into the shuttle’s interior and sucked up Captain Root and his gang, clean as a dwarf sucking a snail from its shell. One second they were there, and the next, nothing remained but a slight smear on the deck and the echo of slobbering slurp.

“I am so glad I stayed where I am,” said one of the remaining prisoners, who had never served with Turnbull. He had, in fact, earned his six-year sentence for making clever copies of collectable cartoon-character spoons. “That blobby thing looked creepy.”

None of the others spoke, as they had immediately realized what catastrophe would result from the blobby thing breaking its seal around the large hole in the hull.

As it happened, the expected catastrophe never got a chance to occur, because as soon as the amorphobots vacated the space, the hole was filled by the rogue probe, which had deviated suddenly from its course to plow through the shuttle, burying it deep into the bedrock of the ocean floor, mashing it completely. As for the people inside the shuttle, they were mostly liquefied. It would be months before any remains were found, and even longer before those remains could be identified. The impact crater was more than fifty feet deep and at least the same across. The whiplash shock rippled across the seabed, decimating the local ecology and stacking half a dozen rescue crafts on top of each other like building blocks.

The giant amorpho-blob bore Turnbull and his cohorts swiftly from the impact site, perfectly mimicking the motion of a giant squid, even sprouting gel-tacles, which funneled the water in a tight cone behind it. Inside the main body of gel, two fairies were perfectly calm: Turnbull could fairly be called serene, and Unix was as unperturbed by this latest marvel as he was by anything that he had seen in his long life. Bobb Ragby, on the other hand, could in truth be called terrified out of his tiny mind. While Turnbull had summoned the amorphobots and had a fair idea of what to expect, as far as Ragby was concerned, they had been swallowed by a jelly monster and were being carried off to its lair to be consumed during the long cold winter. All Ching Mayle could think was one sentence over and over again: *I’m sorry I stole the candy cane*, which more than likely referred to an incident that was significant to him and to whomever he’d stolen the candy cane from.

Turnball reached into the jumble of electronics in the amorphobots’ belly and pulled out a small cordless mask, which he slipped over his face. It was possible to speak through the gel, but the mask made it infinitely easier.

“Well, my brave lads,” he said. “We are now officially dead and free to take a shot at stealing the LEP’s most powerful natural resource. Something truly magical”.

Ching snapped out of his candy-cane loop. He opened his mouth to speak, but realized quickly that while the gel somehow fed oxygen to his lungs, it didn’t support speech so well without a mask.

He gargled for a moment, then decided to pose his question later.

“I can guess what you were about to say, Mr. Mayle,” said Turnbull. “Why in heavens would we want to tangle with the LEP? Surely we should stay as far away from the police as possible.” An amber light in the belly of the bot cast sinister shadows across the captain’s face. “I say no. I say we attack now and steal what we need from right under their noses, and while we’re about it spread a little destruction and mayhem to cover our tracks. You have seen what I can do from a prison cell—imagine what might be possible from the freedom of the wide world.”

It was difficult to argue with this point, especially when the fairy making the point controlled the gel-robot thing that was keeping everyone alive and no one else knew if they could speak or not. Turnbull Root always knew how to pick his moment.

The amorphobot dropped quickly behind a jagged reef, escaping the worst of the shock wave. Slivers of rock and lumps of coral tumbled down through the murky water but were rejected by the gel. A squid ventured too close and was treated to a lick with an electrified gel-tacle. And as the walls of a towering undersea cliff flashed by in stripes of gray and green, Turnbull sighed into his mask, the sound amplified and distorted.

I am coming, my love, he thought. Soon we will be together.

He decided against saying this aloud, as even Unix might think it a little melodramatic.

Turnball realized with a jolt that he was completely happy, and the cost of that happiness bothered him not a jot.

CHAPTER 8
RANDOMOSITY

Artemis Fowl's Brain; Seconds Before Holly Short Shoots Him for the Second Time

Artemis observed and considered from the confines of his own brain, watching through the booby-trapped wall in his imagined office. The scenario was interesting, fascinating, in fact, and almost distracted him from his own problems. Someone had decided to hijack Foaly's Mars probe and aim it directly at Atlantis. And it could not be coincidence that the probe had stopped off in Iceland to take care of Commander Vinyáya and her finest troops, not to mention the Fairy People's wiliest, and only, human ally: Artemis Fowl.

There is an elaborate plan being played out in front of us, not just a series of coincidences.

It wasn't that Artemis didn't believe in coincidences—he just found a *series* of them hard to swallow.

There was one main question, as far as Artemis could see: Who benefits?

Who benefits if Vinyáya dies and Atlantis is threatened?

Vinyáya was well known for her zero-tolerance approach to crime—so many criminals would be delighted to have her out of the way—but why Atlantis?

Of course, the prison! It must be Opal Koboi: this was her bid for freedom. The probe triggers an evacuation that gets her outside the dome.

Opal Koboi, public enemy number one. The pixie who had incited the goblins to revolution and murdered Julius Root.

It must be Opal.

Artemis corrected himself: *It is probably Opal. Don't leap to conclusions.*

It was infuriating to be stuck inside his own brain when there was so much going on in the world. His nano-wafer prototype, the Ice Cube, had been destroyed, and, more urgently, there was a probe headed for Atlantis that could potentially destroy the city, or at the very least allow a homicidal pixie to effect her escape.

“Let me out, won't you?” Artemis shouted at the mind-screen, and the shimmering fours marshaled themselves into squares and sent a lattice of glittering wire flashing across the screen.

Artemis had his answer.

I was put in here by electricity, and now it's barring my way.

Artemis knew that there were many reputable institutes around the world that still used electroshock therapy to deal with various psychotic illnesses. He realized that when Holly had blasted him with her Neutrino, the charge had boosted the Orion personality, making it the dominant one.

It's a pity Holly wouldn't shoot me again.

Holly shot him again.

Artemis imagined two jagged forks of white lightning skittering through the air and turning the screen white.

I shouldn't feel any pain, reasoned Artemis hopefully, as technically I am not conscious at the moment.

Conscious or not, Artemis felt just as much agony as Orion.

Typical of the way my day has been going, he thought as his virtual legs collapsed underneath him.

The North Atlantic Ocean; Now

Artemis woke some time later with the smell of singed flesh in his nostrils. He knew he was back in the real world because of the harness digging into his shoulders and the choppy motion of the sea, which was making him nauseated.

He opened his eyes and found himself looking at Foaly's rump. The centaur's back leg was kicking spasmodically as he battled sleep demons. There was music playing somewhere. Familiar music. Artemis closed his eyes and thought, That music is familiar because I composed it. "Siren Song" from my unfinished Third Symphony.

And why was it important?

It is important because I set it as my ring tone for Mother. She is calling me.

Artemis did not pat his pockets searching for his phone, because he always kept his phone in the same pocket. Indeed, he always had his tailors sew a leather-flapped zipper into his right breast pocket so that his phone could not be mislaid. For if Artemis Fowl mislaid his modified phone, it would be a little more serious than if Johnny Highschool happened to lose the latest touch-screen model, unless Johnny Highschool's phone happened to have enough tech inside it to easily hack any government site, a nice little laser pointer that could be focused to burn through metal, and the first draft of Artemis Fowl's memoirs, which did a little more than kiss and tell.

Artemis's fingers were cold and numb, but after a few attempts he managed to paw the zipper open and fumble out his phone. On screen the phone was playing a photo slideshow of his mother while the opening bars of "Siren Song" soared through the tiny speakers.

"Phone," he said clearly, holding in a button on the casing to activate voice control.

"Yes, Artemis," said the phone in Lily Frond's voice, a voice that Artemis had picked simply to annoy Holly.

"Accept the call."

"Of course, Artemis."

A moment later the connection was made. The signal was weak, but that did not matter as Artemis's phone had speech auto-fill software that was ninety-five percent accurate.

"Hello, Mother. How are you?"

"Arty, can you hear me? I've got an echo."

"No. No echo on this end. I can hear you perfectly."

"I can't get the video to work, Artemis. You promised we would be able to see each other."

The video-call option was available, but Artemis rejected it, as he did not think his mother would be heartened by the view of her disheveled son hanging from a harness in a crippled escape pod.

Disheveled? Who am I kidding? I must look like a refugee from a war zone, which is what I am.

"There's no video network in Iceland. I should have checked."

"Hmm," said his mother, and Artemis knew that syllable well. It meant that she suspected him of something, but didn't know what, exactly.

"So you *are* in Iceland?"

Artemis was glad there was no video feed, as it was more difficult to lie face-to-face.

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

"I ask because the GPS puts you in the North Atlantic Ocean."

Artemis frowned. His mother had insisted on a GPS function on the phone if she were to allow him to go off alone.

“That’s probably just a bug in the program,” said Artemis as he quickly tapped into the GPS application and manually set his location to Reykjavík. “Sometimes the locator is a little off. Give it another try.”

Silence for moment, but for the tapping of keys, then another *hmmm*.

“I suppose it’s redundant to ask whether or not you’re up to something? Artemis Fowl is always up to something.”

“That’s not fair, Mother,” protested Artemis. “You know what I’m trying to achieve.”

“I do know. My goodness, Arty, it’s all you can talk about. *THE PROJECT*.”

“It is important.”

“I know that, but people are important too. How’s Holly?”

Artemis glanced at Holly, who was curled around the leg of a bench, snoring quietly. Her uniform looked very battered, and there was blood leaking from one ear.

“She’s . . . em . . . fine. A little tired from the journey, but totally in control of the situation. I admire her, Mother, really I do. The way she handles whatever life throws at her and never gives up.”

Angeline Fowl drew a surprised breath. “Well, Artemis Fowl the Second, that is about the longest nonscientific speech I have ever heard you make. Holly Short is lucky to have a friend like you.”

“No she isn’t,” said Artemis miserably. “No one is lucky to know me. I can’t help anyone. I can’t even help myself.”

“That’s not true, Arty,” said Angeline strictly. “Who saved Haven from the goblins?”

“A few people. I suppose I had a part in it.”

“And who found his father in the Arctic when everyone else had given him up for dead?”

“That was me.”

“Well, then, never say you can’t help anyone. You’ve spent most of your life helping. Yes, you’ve made a few mistakes, but your heart is in the right place.”

“Thank you, Mother. I feel better now.”

Angeline cleared her throat—a little nervously, Artemis thought.

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. There’s just something I need to tell you.”

Artemis felt suddenly nervous. “What is it, Mother?”

A dozen possible revelations ran through his head. Had his mother found out about some of his shadier operations?

She knew all about his various fairy-related schemes, but there was plenty of human stuff he hadn’t confessed to.

That’s the problem with being a semi-reformed criminal: you are never free from guilt. Exposure is always just a phone call away.

“It’s about your birthday.”

Artemis’s shoulders drooped with relief. “My birthday. Is that all?”

“I got you something . . . different, but I want you to have them. It would make me happy.”

“If they make you happy, I am sure they will make me happy.”

“So, Arty, you have to promise me you’ll use them.”

Artemis’s nature made it hard for him to promise anything. “What are they?”

“Promise me, honey.”

Artemis glanced out of the porthole. He was stuck in a burned-out escape pod in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Either they would sink, or some Scandinavian navy would mistake them for aliens and blow their tub out of the water.

“Very well, I promise. So, what did you get for me?”

Angeline paused for a beat. “Jeans.”

“What?” croaked Artemis.

“And a T-shirt.”

Artemis knew that he shouldn’t really be upset, in the circumstances, but he couldn’t help himself. “Mother, you tricked me.”

“Now, I know you don’t really do casual.”

“That’s hardly fair. Last month at that cake sale I rolled up both sleeves.”

“People are afraid of you, Arty. Girls are terrified of you. You’re a fifteen-year-old in a bespoke suit, and nobody died.”

Artemis took several breaths. “Does the T-shirt have any writing on it?”

A rustling of paper crackled through the phone’s speakers. “Yes. It’s so cool. There’s a picture of a boy who for some reason has no neck and only three fingers on each hand, and behind him in a sort of graffiti style is the word *randomosity*. I don’t know what that means, but it sounds really current.”

Randomosity, thought Artemis, and he felt like weeping. “Mother, I . . .”

“You promised, Arty. That’s what you did.”

“Yes. I did promise, Mother.”

“And I want you to call me Mum.”

“Mother! You’re being unreasonable. I am who I am. T-shirts and jeans are not me.”

Angeline Fowl played her trump card. “Well, you know, Arty dear, sometimes people are not who they think they are.”

This was a none-too-subtle dig at Artemis for *mesmerizing* his own parents, something Angeline had only become aware of when Opal Koboi had occupied her body and all the secrets of the fairy world had become known to her.

“That’s hardly fair.”

“Fair? Wait, let me call the gentlemen of the press. Artemis Fowl just used the word *fair*.”

Artemis realized that his mother was not quite over the *mesmerizing* thing yet.

“Very well. I consent to wearing the jeans and T-shirt.”

“Excuse me?”

“Very well. I will wear the jeans and T-shirt . . . Mum.”

“I am so happy. Tell Butler to put by two days a week. Jeans and Mums. Get used to it.”

What’s next? Artemis wondered. Baseball hats worn back to front?

“Butler is taking good care of you, I trust?”

Artemis colored. More lies. “Yes. You should see his face at this meeting. He is bored out of his mind with all the science.”

Angeline’s voice changed, became warmer, more emotional.

“I know it’s important, Arty, what you’re doing. Important for the planet, I mean. And I believe in you, son. Which is why I am keeping your secret and letting you gallivant across the globe with fairy folk, but you have to promise me that you’re safe.”

Artemis had heard the expression *to feel like a real heel*, but now he actually understood it.

“I am the safest human in the world,” he said jauntily. “I have more protection than a president. I’m better armed too.”

Yet another *hmmm*. “This is the last solo mission, Arty. You promised me. ‘I just have to save the world,’ you said. ‘Then I can spend more time with the twins.’”

“I remember,” said Artemis, which wasn’t really agreeing.

“See you tomorrow morning, then. The dawn of a new day.”

“See you tomorrow morning, Mum.”

Angeline hung up, and her picture disappeared from Artemis’s screen. He was sorry to see it go.

On the deck, Foaly suddenly flipped onto his back.

“Not the stripy ones,” he blurted. “They’re just little babies.” Then he opened his eyes and saw Artemis watching him.

“Did I say that out loud?”

Artemis nodded. “Yes. Something about the stripy ones being babies.”

“Childhood memory. I’m pretty much over it now.”

Artemis stretched out a hand to help the centaur to his hooves.

“No help from you,” Foaly moaned, slapping at the hand as though it were a wasp. “I have had enough of you.

If you even think the phrase *goodly beast*, I am going to kick you straight in the teeth.”

Artemis slapped the buckle on his chest, opening the harness, stretching his hand out farther.

“I am sorry about all of that, Foaly. But I’m fine now. It’s me, Artemis.”

Now Foaly accepted the steadying hand. “Oh, thank the gods. That other guy was really getting on my nerves.”

“Not so fast,” said Holly, appearing fully conscious between the two.

“Whoa,” said Foaly, rearing. “Don’t you moan and groan a bit when you regain consciousness?”

“Nope,” said Holly. “LEP ninja training. And this guy isn’t Artemis. He said *Mum*. I heard him. Artemis Fowl doesn’t say Mum, Mummy, Mom, or Momsy. This is Orion trying to pull a fast one.”

“I realize how it sounded,” said Artemis. “But you have to believe me. My mother extorted that term of endearment from me.”

Foaly tapped his long chin. “*Extorted? Endearment?* It’s Artemis, all right.”

“Thanks for shooting me the second time,” said Artemis, touching the burn marks on his neck. “The charge set me free from the fours, for the time being. And I’m sorry about all that rubbish Orion was spouting. I have no idea where that came from.”

“We need to talk about that at great length,” said Holly, brushing past him to the dashboard. “But later. First, let’s see if I can raise Haven.”

Foaly tapped a button on his phone’s screen. “Already on it, Captain.”

After all the drama of the previous few hours, it seemed impossible that they could simply phone Haven and get a connection just like that, but that’s exactly what happened.

Commander Trouble Kelp picked up on the first ring, and Foaly put the video call on speaker.

“Holly? Is that you?”

“Yes, Commander. I have Foaly with me, and Artemis Fowl.”

Trouble grunted. “Artemis Fowl. Why am I not surprised? We should have sucked that Mud Whelp’s brain out through his ear when we had the chance.”

Trouble Kelp was famous for his gung-ho attitude— that and the fact that he had chosen *Trouble* as his graduation name. There was an honest-to-gods true story going around the Academy that, as a lowly street cop, young Officer Kelp drove his riot scooter down an alley in Boolatown during the solstice and PAed to a dozen or so scrapping goblins the immortal line: *If you're looking for trouble, you've come to the right place.* After the goblins had finished laughing, they gave Trouble a hiding he did not soon forget. The scars made him a little more cautious, but not much.

Trouble sat at his desk in Police Plaza, ramrod straight in his blue commander's jumpsuit, acorn cluster glittering on his chest. His dark hair was close-cropped over impressive pointed ears, and deep purple eyes glared out from under brows that jinked like lightning bolts as he spoke.

"Hello, Commander," said Artemis. "Nice to be appreciated."

"I appreciate armpit lice more than I'm ever likely to appreciate you, Fowl. Get over it."

Artemis could think of half a dozen withering responses to this comment off the top of his head, but he kept these put-downs to himself for the greater good.

I am fifteen now; time to behave maturely.

Holly cut through the male posturing. "Commander, is Atlantis safe?"

"Most of it," said Trouble. "Half a dozen evac ships took a pasting. One shuttle suffered a direct hit, buried deeper than hell itself. It's going to take months to put the pieces together."

Holly's shoulders drooped. "Casualties?"

"Definitely. We don't know how many yet, but dozens." Trouble's brow was heavy with the weight of command. "It's a dark day for the People, Captain. First Vinyáya and her troops, now this."

"What happened?"

Trouble's gaze shifted to a point off screen as his fingers tapped a V-board. "One of Foaly's brainers did a simulation. I'm sending it to you now."

Seconds later, a message icon pulsed on the screen of Foaly's phone. Holly selected it, and a simple 2-D video played, depicting an outlined probe entering the Earth's atmosphere over Iceland.

"Can you see that, Captain?"

"Yes, it's up."

"Good. Let me talk you through it. So, Foaly's Martian probe shows up just below the Arctic Circle. We're taking your word for this since we didn't detect it, thanks to our own cloaking technology. Shields, stealth ore, all turned against us. I don't have to tell you what happened next."

On screen the probe sent a laser burst into a small target on the surface, then jettisoned a few bots to deal with survivors. The craft barely slowed down before plowing through the ice, taking a southwesterly course toward the Atlantic.

"Again, this part of the simulation was done without computer data. We took what you told us and also extrapolated backward from our own readings."

Artemis interrupted. "You had readings? At what point did you start to get readings?"

"It was the strangest thing," said Trouble, frowning. "We heeded Captain Short's warning and ran a scan. Nothing. Then, five minutes later, up the probe pops on our screens. No shields, nothing. In fact, she was blowing heat out the vents, so we couldn't miss her. She even blew her engine plates off. The thing was shining brighter than the North Star. And just in case we missed it, we got a tip-off from a bar in Miami, of all places. We had time enough to evacuate."

"But not enough to reach her," mused Artemis.

"Exactly," said Trouble Kelp, who wouldn't have agreed if it had occurred to him that he was agreeing with arch-criminal Artemis Fowl. "All we could do was pump up the water cannons, empty

the city, and wait until the probe came into range.”

“And then?” prompted Artemis.

“Then I authorized a few practice shots along the trajectory before the probe was really in range. There shouldn’t have been enough power in them to cause any damage—the water shells dissipate over distance—but one must have held on to a bit of punch, because the probe spun off course and nose-dived straight into the seabed, taking a shuttle down with it.”

“Opal Koboi was on that shuttle, wasn’t she?” said Artemis urgently. “This is all her doing. This reeks of Opal.”

“No, Fowl, if it reeks of anyone, it reeks of you. This all started with your conference in Iceland, and now some of our best people are dead, and we have an underwater rescue mission on our hands.”

Artemis’s face was red. “Forget how you feel about me. Was Opal on the shuttle?”

“She was not,” thundered Trouble, and the pod’s speakers vibrated. “But you were in Iceland, and now you’re here.”

Holly stepped in to defend her friend. “Artemis had nothing to do with this, Commander.”

“That may be, but there are too many coincidences here, Holly. I need you to detain the Mud Boy until I can get a rescue bird up to you. It could be a few hours, so take on some ballast in the tanks and drop your buoyancy a little. You shouldn’t be spotted below the surface.”

Holly was not happy with this course of action. “Sir, Commander, we know *what* happened. But Artemis is right—we need to think about *who* made it happen.”

“We can talk about that in Police Plaza. For now, my priority is to keep people alive, simple as that. There are fairies still trapped in Atlantis. Everything watertight we have is headed there right now. We can discuss the Mud Boy’s theories tomorrow.”

“Maybe we can construct a bivouac while we’re at it,” muttered Holly.

Trouble Kelp was not one to swallow insubordination. He leaned close to the camera, his forehead stretching wide in the pinhole lens.

“Did you say something, Captain?”

“Whoever did this is not finished,” said Holly, doing a little leaning in herself. “This is part of a bigger plan, and detaining Artemis is the worst possible thing you could do.”

“Oh, really,” said Trouble, chuckling unexpectedly. “Odd you should say that, because in the message you sent earlier, you commented that Artemis Fowl had lost it. Your exact words were—”

Holly glanced guiltily at Artemis. “No need for the exact words, sir.”

“*Sir* now, is it? Your *exact* words were, and I quote— obviously since they are your exact words—you said that Artemis Fowl was ‘crazier than a salt-water-drinking troll with ringworm.’”

Artemis shot Holly a recriminating look that said:

Ringworm? Really?

Holly brushed the comment aside with a hand. “That was earlier. I have shot Artemis twice since then, and he’s fine now.”

Trouble grinned. “You shot him twice. That’s more like it.”

“The point is,” Holly persisted, “we need Artemis to help figure this out.”

“Like he *figured out* Julius Root and Commander Raine Vinyáya.”

“That is not fair, Trouble.”

Kelp was unrepentant. “You can call me *Trouble* in the officers’ club on the weekend. Until then it’s Commander. And I order you, no, I *command* you to detain the human Artemis Fowl. We’re not arresting him—I just want him down here for a little chat. What I certainly do not want is for us to act

on any of his notions. Understood?”

Holly’s face was wooden and her voice dull. “Understood, Commander.”

“Your pod has enough juice to power the locator, no more, so don’t even think about making for the shore. You look a shade paler than death, Captain, so I’m guessing you don’t have any spare magic for shielding.”

“Paler than death? Thanks, Trubs.”

“Trubs, Captain? *Trubs?*”

“I meant Trouble.”

“That’s better. So all I want you to do is sit on the Mud Boy. Got it?”

Holly’s words were so honeyed that they could have charmed a bear. “I’ve got it good, Trouble. Captain Holly Short, babysitter extraordinaire, at your service.”

“Hmmm,” said Trouble, in a tone that Angeline Fowl’s son understood very well.

“Hmmm, indeed,” said Holly.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” said Trouble, with a flicker of one eyelid that could be interpreted as a wink. “I, as your superior, am telling you to stay put and not make any attempt to get to the bottom of what’s really going on here, especially not with the help of a human, *especially* especially not that particular human. Do you read me?”

“I read you loud and clear, Trouble,” said Holly, and Artemis understood that Trouble Kelp was not forbidding Holly to investigate further—he was actually covering himself on video in case Holly’s actions resulted in a tribunal, which they often did.

“I read you loud and clear too, Commander,” said Artemis. “If that makes any difference.”

Trouble snorted. “Remember those armpit lice, Fowl? Their opinions make more difference to me than yours.”

And he was gone before Artemis could trot out one of his pre-prepared retorts. And in years to come, when Professor J. Argon published the best-selling Artemis Fowl biography, *Fowl and Fairy*, this particular exchange would be deemed significant as one of the few times anyone got the last word over Artemis Fowl II.

Holly made a sound that was a little like a shriek, but not as girly and with more frustration.

“What’s the matter?” asked Foaly. “I thought that went pretty well. It seemed to me that Commander Trouble Kelp, a.k.a. your boyfriend, gave us the green light to investigate.”

Holly turned her mismatched eyes on him. “First of all, he’s not my boyfriend—we went on one date, and I told you that in confidence because I thought you were a friend who wouldn’t trot it out at the first opportunity.”

“It’s not the first opportunity. I held it back the time when we had that lovely tea.”

“Irrelevant!” shouted Holly, through funneled hands.

“Don’t worry, Holly, it stays in this room,” said Foaly, thinking it would be a bad time to mention that he had posted the gossip on his Web site www.horsesense.gnom.

“And secondly,” continued Holly, “maybe Trouble did give me the backhanded go-ahead, but what good is that to us in the middle of the Atlantic in a dead lump of metal?”

Artemis glanced skyward. “Ah, you see, I might be able to help you there. Any second now.”

Several seconds passed by without any significant change in their situation.

Holly raised her palms. “Any second? Really?” Artemis couldn’t help being a little peeved. “Not literally. It might take a minute or so. Perhaps I should call him.”

Fifty-nine seconds later, something bonged against the pod’s hatch.

“Aha,” said Artemis, in a way that made Holly feel like punching him.

Over the Atlantic; Two Hours Earlier

“This is not a bad ship, as it happens,” said Mulch Diggums, pushing a couple of buttons on the stolen mercenaries’ ship just to see what they did. When one caused the contents of the sewage recycler to be dumped on an innocent Scottish deep-sea trawler below, the dwarf decided to stop pushing.

(One of the fishermen happened to be making a video of gulls for his university media course and caught the entire descending blob of waste matter on film. It seemed to anyone who saw the tape as though the ponging mass just appeared in the sky then dropped rapidly onto the unfortunate sailors. Sky News ran the video with the headline: Panic on the Poop Deck. The segment was largely dismissed as a student prank.)

“I should have guessed that one,” Mulch said, without a trace of guilt. “There’s a little picture of a toilet on the button.”

Juliet sat hunched over on one of the passenger benches that ran along one side of the cargo bay, her head tipping the ceiling, and Butler lay flat on the other one, as it was the most practical way for him to travel.

“So Artemis has been shutting you out?” she asked her brother.

“Yes,” replied Butler dejectedly. “I’d swear he doesn’t trust me anymore. I’d swear he doesn’t even trust his own mother.”

“Angeline? How could anyone not trust Mrs. Fowl? That’s ridiculous.”

“I know,” said Butler. “And I’ll go one better. Artemis doesn’t trust the twins.”

Juliet started, bumping her head on the metal ceiling. “Oww. *Madre de dios*. Artemis doesn’t trust Myles and Beckett? That’s just ridiculous. What terrible acts of sabotage are three-year-olds supposed to commit?”

Butler grimaced. “Unfortunately, Myles contaminated one of Artemis’s petri dishes when he wanted a sample for his own experiments.”

“That’s hardly industrial espionage. What did Beckett do?”

“He ate Artemis’s hamster.”

“What?”

“Well, he chewed on its leg for a bit.” Butler shifted in the cramped space. Fairy crafts were not built to accommodate giant, shaven-headed, human bodyguards. Not that the shaved head made much difference.

“Artemis was livid, claimed there was a conspiracy against him. He installed a combination lock on his lab door to keep his brothers out.”

Juliet grinned, though she knew she shouldn’t. “Did that work?”

“No. Myles stayed at the door for three days straight, tapping away until he came across the correct combination. He used several rolls of toilet paper writing down the possibilities.”

Juliet was almost afraid to ask. “What did Beckett do?”

Butler grinned back at his sister. “Beckett dug a bear trap in the garden, and when Myles fell in, he swapped him a ladder for the code.”

Juliet nodded appreciatively. “That’s what I would have done.”

“Me too,” said Butler. “Maybe Beckett will end up as Myles’s bodyguard.” The light moment didn’t last long. “Artemis isn’t taking my calls. Imagine that. I think he’s changed his SIM, so I can’t track him.”

“But we are tracking him, right?”

Butler checked his touch-screen phone. “Oh yes. Artemis isn’t the only one with Foaly’s phone number.”

“What did that sneaky centaur give you?”

“An isotope spray. You just spray it on a surface, then track it with one of Foaly’s mi-p’s.”

“Meepees?”

“Mini-programs. Foaly uses it to keep an eye on his kids.”

“Where did you spray it?”

“Artemis’s shoes.”

Juliet giggled. “He does like ’em shiny.”

“Yes, he does.”

“You’re starting to think like a Fowl, brother.”

Mulch Diggums called back from the cockpit. “Gods help us all. That’s what the world needs, more Fowls.”

They all shared a guilty laugh at that.

The mercenary gyro tracked the Gulf Stream north to the coast of Ireland, moving at slightly more than twice the speed ever achieved by the Concorde, then swung in a long northwesterly arc into the North Atlantic as its computer zeroed in on Artemis’s footwear.

“Artemis’s shoes are walking us right to him,” said Mulch, chortling at his own joke. The Butlers did not join in the mirth, not from any loyalty to their employer, who enjoyed the occasional joke, but because Mulch’s mouth was packed with the contents of the shuttle’s cooler box, and they had no idea what he had just said.

“Please yourselves,” said Mulch, spattering the inside of the windshield with chewed sweet corn. “I make the effort to speak in humanese, and you two joke snobs won’t even laugh at my efforts.”

The shuttle rocketed along, six feet above the wave tops, its anti-grav pulses burrowing periodic cylinders into the ocean’s surface. The engine noise was low and could have been mistaken for a whistling wind, and to any smart mammals below who could see through the shields, the shuttle could be mistaken for a very fast humpback with an extra-wide tail and a loading bay.

“We really lucked out with this bucket,” commented Mulch, his mouth mercifully empty. “She’s more or less flying herself. I just put your phone into the dock, opened the mi-p, and off she went.”

The craft behaved a little like a tracker dog, suddenly coming to a dead stop whenever it lost the scent, then casting its prow about furiously until the isotope showed up again. At one point it had plunged into the ocean, burrowing straight down until pressure cracked the fuselage plates, and they lost a square foot of shielding.

“Don’t worry, Mud Men,” Mulch had reassured them. “All fairy craft have sea engines. When you live underground, it makes sense to build watertight ships.”

Juliet had not ceased to worry: from what she remembered, reassurance from Mulch Diggums was about as reliable as a cocktail from the Pittsburgh Poisoner.

Fortunately, the underwater jaunt hadn’t lasted too long, and soon they were flitting across the wave tops once more without incident, except for the time when Mulch forgot his promise not to press mysterious buttons and almost crashed them into the sun-flecked seas by releasing the emergency-brake mini-parachute cluster.

“It was calling me, that button,” he offered as his excuse. “I couldn’t resist.”

The jolting stop had shunted Butler along the bench. He slid the entire length of the fuselage into the cockpit divider. Only his lightning reactions stopped him from getting his head jammed in the railings.

Butler rubbed his crown, which he had clipped on a bar. "Take it easy, or there will be consequences. You said it yourself: we don't need you to fly the ship."

Mulch guffawed, giving a nasty view of his cavernous food pipe. "That's true, Butler, my freakishly large friend. But you certainly need me to land it."

Juliet's laugh was high and sweet and seemed to ricochet off the curved metal walls.

"You too, Juliet?" said Butler reproachfully.

"Come on, brother. That was funny. You'll laugh too when Mulch plays back the video."

"There's video?" said Butler, which just set the other two laughing again.

All of this laughing did nothing to delay Butler's reunion with his principal, Artemis Fowl. A principal who no longer trusted him and who had probably lied to him, sending Butler to another continent and using Juliet to ensure that he would travel.

I believed that my own baby sister was in danger. Artemis, how could you?

There would be tough questions asked when he finally caught up with Artemis. And the answers had better be good or, for the first time in the history of their families' centuries-long relationship, a Butler might just walk away from his duties.

Artemis is ill, Butler rationalized. He's not responsible.

Maybe Artemis was not responsible. But he soon would be.

The mercenaries' shuttle finally jerked to a halt over a spot of open ocean just above the sixtieth parallel. It was a spot that seemed no different than the square gray miles that stretched away on all sides, until the anti-grav pillar plowed through six feet of water below, revealing the arrowhead escape pod.

"I love this ship," Mulch crowed. "It makes me look smarter-er than I am."

The surrounding waters churned and boiled as the invisible pulses tested the surface and compacted the waves enough to keep the ship hovering in place. Down below, the pulses would sound like bell clappers on the pod's skin.

"Hello," called Mulch. "We're up here."

Butler stuck his head and shoulders into the cockpit, which was about all of him that could fit.

"Can't we radio them?"

"Radio?" said the dwarf. "You don't know much about being a fugitive, do you? The first thing you do when you steal an LEP ship is strip out anything that could carry a signal to Police Plaza. Every wire, every fuse, every lens. All gone. I've known guys who got caught because they left the sound system in. That's an old Foaly trick. He knows bad boys love their loud music, so he installs a set of speakers to kill for in every LEP bird, each one loaded with tracer gel. There's hardly any tech left in here."

"So?"

"So what?" said Mulch, as if he had no idea what they were talking about.

"So how do we communicate with that ship down there?"

"You have a phone, don't you?"

Butler's eyes dropped to the floor. "Artemis is not taking my calls. He's not himself."

“That’s terrible,” said Mulch. “But do you think they have food? Some of those escape pods have emergency rations. A little chewy, but okay with a nice bottle of beer.”

Butler was wondering whether this change of subject warranted a clip on the ear, when his phone rang.

“It’s Artemis,” he said, seeming a little more shocked than when he’d been surrounded by *luchador* zombies.

“Butler?” said Artemis’s voice.

“Yes, Artemis.”

“We need to talk.”

“You’d better make it good,” said Butler, and severed the connection.

It took mere moments to winch down a bucket seat to the pod below, and another few minutes for the pod’s occupants to clamber into the mercenaries’ shuttle. Holly was the last up as she pulled the scuttle cord and opened the escape pod’s ballast tanks wide before she left, sinking the craft.

As soon as her elbow crabbed over the doorway’s lip, Holly began giving orders.

“Monitor LEP channels on the radio,” she barked. “We need to find out how the investigation is proceeding.”

Mulch grinned from the pilot’s chair. “Aha, you see that might be a problem, this being a stolen ship and all. Not much in the way of communications. And hello, by the way. I’m fine, still alive, and all that. Happy to be able to save your life. Also, what investigation are we talking about?”

Holly pulled herself all the way inside, glancing regretfully down at the sinking pod with its—until recently—functional communications array.

“Ah well,” she sighed. “You work with whatever limited resources you have.”

“Thanks a bunch,” said Mulch, miffed. “Did you bring any food? I haven’t eaten for, wow, it must be minutes.”

“No, no food,” said Holly. She hugged Mulch tightly, one of perhaps four people in the world who would voluntarily touch the dwarf, then pushed him out of the pilot’s chair, taking his place. “That will have to do for niceties. I’ll buy you an entire barbecue hamper later.”

“With real meat?”

Holly shuddered. “Of course not. Don’t be disgusting.”

Butler sat up and spared a moment to nod at Holly, then turned his full attention on Artemis, who carried himself like the Artemis of old but without the customary cockiness.

“Well?” said Butler, the single syllable laden with implication. *If I do not like what I hear, it could be the end of the road for us.*

Artemis knew that the situation merited at least a hug, and some day in the future, after years of meditation, he might feel comfortable spontaneously hugging people, but at this moment it was all he could do to lay a hand on Juliet’s shoulder and another on Butler’s forearm.

“I am so sorry, my friends, to have lied to you.”

Juliet covered the hand with her own, for that was her nature, but Butler raised his as though he were being arrested.

“Juliet could have died, Artemis. We were forced to fight off a horde of *mesmerized* wrestling fans and a ship-load of dwarf mercenaries. We were both in grave danger.”

Artemis pulled away, the moment of emotion past. “Real danger? Then someone has been spying on me. Someone who knew our movements. Possibly the same someone who sent the probe to kill

Vinyáya and target Atlantis.”

Over the next few minutes, while Holly ran a systems check and plotted a course for the crash site, Artemis brought Butler and Juliet up to speed, saving the diagnosis of his own illness for last.

“I have a disorder which the fairies call an Atlantis Complex. It is similar to obsessive-compulsive disorder but also manifests as delusional dementia and even multiple personality.” Butler nodded slowly. “I see. So when you sent me away, you were in the grips of this Atlantis Complex.”

“Exactly. I was in stage one, which involves a large dose of paranoia as one of its symptoms. You missed stage two.”

“Lucky for you,” Holly called back from the cockpit. “That Orion guy was a little too friendly.”

“My subconscious built the Orion personality as my alter ego. Artemis, I’m sure you remember, was the goddess of the hunt, and legend has it that Orion was Artemis’s mortal enemy, so she sent a scorpion to kill him. In my mind Orion was free from the guilt I harbored from my various schemes, especially the guilt of *mesmerizing* my parents, kidnapping Holly, and, crucially, seeing my mother possessed by Opal. Perhaps had I not dabbled in magic I might have developed a slight personality disorder, maybe even Child Genius Syndrome, but with my neural pathways coated with stolen magic I know now that it was inevitable I would succumb to Atlantis.” Artemis dropped his eyes. “What I did was shameful. I was weak and I will carry regret for the rest of my life.”

Butler’s face softened. “Are you well now? Did the electrocution do the trick?”

Foaly was getting a little tired of Artemis doing all the lecturing, so he cleared his throat and volunteered some information. “According to my phone’s mi-p almanac, shock treatment is an archaic treatment and rarely permanent. Atlantis Complex can be cured, but only through extended therapy and the careful use of psychoactive drugs. Soon, Artemis’s compulsions will return and he will feel an irresistible urge to complete his mission, to number things, and to avoid the number four, which I believe sounds like the Chinese word for death.”

“So, Artemis is not cured?”

Artemis was suddenly glad that there were five other people in the shuttle. A good omen for success.

“No. I am not cured yet.”

Omens? It begins again.

Artemis actually wrung his hands, a physical sign of his determination.

I will not be beaten by this so soon.

And to prove it, he deliberately composed a sentence with four words.

“I will be fine.”

“Oooh,” said Mulch, who always had trouble grasping the gravity of situations. “Four. Scary.”

The first thing was to get them down to the crash site, as it seemed obvious to everyone except Mulch that the space probe did not navigate its way through the atmosphere with pinpoint accuracy just to accidentally crash into a prison shuttle. With Holly at the controls, the stolen ship was soon slicing through the Atlantic depths, trailing intertwining streams of air bubbles.

“There’s something afoot here,” mused Artemis, gripping the fingers of his left hand tightly to stop them from shaking. “Vinyáya was taken out to hobble the LEP, then the probe gives up its own position, and someone phones in a tip allowing the Atlantis authorities just enough time to evacuate, and then the probe lands on a shuttle. Bad luck for the occupants?”

“Is that one of those rhetorical questions?” wondered Mulch. “I can never get the hang of those.”

Also, while we're on the subject, what's the difference between a metaphor and a simile?"

Holly snapped her fingers. "Somebody wanted everybody in the shuttle dead."

"Somebody wanted us to *think* that everyone in the shuttle was dead," corrected Artemis. "What a way to fake your own death. It will be months before the LEP can put the pieces together, if ever. That's a nice head start for a fugitive."

Holly turned to Foaly. "I need to know who was on that prison shuttle. Do you have an inside guy in Police Plaza?"

Butler was surprised. "Inside guy? I thought you guys were the inside guys."

"We're a little on the outside at the moment," admitted Holly. "I'm supposed to be detaining Artemis."

Juliet clapped her hands. "Have you ever actually obeyed an order?"

"It was kind of a non-order, and anyway I only obey orders when they are sound. In this case, it would be ridiculous to sit around for an hour in a burned-out pod while our enemy, whoever it is, gets on with phase two."

"I agree," said Artemis, keeping his voice level.

"How can we be sure there is a phase two?" Butler asked.

Artemis smiled grimly. "Of course there is phase two. Our opponent is fiendish and clever—there will never be a better time to drive home his advantage. It's what I would have done, a few years ago." His normal calm shattered for a moment, and he snapped at Foaly. "I need that list, Foaly. Who was on that prison shuttle?"

"Okay, okay, Mud Boy. I'm working on it. I need to go the long way around so my enquiries don't land on Trouble's desk. This is technical, complicated stuff."

What the centaur would never admit was that he was actually asking his gifted nephew Mayne to hack into the police live site and text him the list in return for an extra-large ice-cream cone when he returned home.

"Okay. I have it, from my . . . eh . . . source."

"Just tell me, Foaly."

Foaly projected a screen from his phone to the wall. Beside each name there was a link to a data charge that would tell you everything about the prisoner right down to the color of his underpants, if that's what you really wanted to know, and fairy psychologists were becoming more and more convinced that undergarment coloring was a vital part of a person's development. Mulch spotted a name he knew, and it wasn't a criminal.

"Hey, look. Old Vishby was piloting. They must have given him his license back."

"Do you know him, Mulch?" asked Holly sharply.

For such a hardened ex-criminal, Mulch had a soft center. "Hey, why so crabby? I'm trying to help out here. Of course I know him. It would be pretty weird me saying 'Hey, look, old Vishby, they gave him his license back' if I didn't know him."

Holly took a breath, reminding herself how Mulch had to be handled. "You're right, of course. So how do you know *old Vishby*?"

"Funny story, really," replied Mulch, smacking his lips, wishing he had a chicken leg to go along with the story. "I escaped from him a few years ago when you were in the frame for murdering Julius. He never got over it. He still hates me, hates the LEP too for taking his licence. Sends me abusive mails occasionally. I send him back little vid boxes of myself laughing. Drives him crazy."

"Someone with a grudge," said Artemis. "Interesting. The perfect inside man. But who's running

him?”

Holly turned to study the projected list.

“This sprite, Unix. I took him in. He’s one of Turnball Root’s boys. A cold-blooded killer.” Holly paled. “Bobb Ragby is on here too. And Turnball himself. *All* these guys are Turnball’s. How in the name of the gods did he get his entire gang on one shuttle? This would have raised a dozen flags on the computer.”

“Unless . . .” said Artemis, scrolling down the list on Foaly’s screen. He tapped the data charge beside Bobb Ragby. His picture and file opened on a separate window, and Artemis quickly scanned it. “Look, there’s no mention of Turnball Root. According to this, Ragby was arrested for mail fraud and has no known affiliations or accomplices.” He tapped another link and read aloud. “‘File updated by . . . Mr. Vishby.’”

Holly was in shock. “It’s Turnball Root. He set this up.”

Holly herself had been responsible for the capture of Julius’s brother during her Recon initiation exercise. It was a story she had told Foaly many times.

“It would appear that Turnball is our adversary, which is not good news. But even taking his intellect and his hold over this Vishby person into account, we still don’t know how he commandeered a space probe.”

“It’s just not possible,” said Foaly, adding an equine harrumph to lend weight to a statement that even he did not believe.

“Possible or not, we’ll have to talk about it later,” said Holly, leveling the craft to just off horizontal. “We’re at the crash site.”

Everyone was relieved that the stolen ship had made it down in one piece. The mercenaries had probably stripped out much of what they didn’t need, to save weight, and, more than likely, they had been a little reckless with the crowbars as they’d gone about it. One loose rivet or cracked weld line would have been enough to allow a few atmospheres to squirt out, and the ship would have been crushed like a soda can in the hand of a giant who was immensely strong and didn’t like soda cans.

But the ship held its integrity in spite of an ominous rippling along the fuselage, which appeared suddenly.

“Who cares?” said Mulch, as usual failing to see the big picture. “It’s not even our ship. What are those mercenaries going to do, sue?” But even as he spoke, Mulch’s humor was tinged with loss.

I can never go back to The Sozzled Parrot again, he realized. And they served great curry. Real meat too.

Outside and below, Atlantis rescue ships buzzed around the distressed shuttles, working hard to build a pressure dome so the crews could get some magic to the injured. Sea workers in pressure exo-armor hammered through rocks and debris on the seabed to lay a foam seal to build the dome upon. Nobody was too concerned about the crash site itself, for the time being. The living came first.

“I should call in this Turnball Root theory,” said Holly. “Commander Kelp will act on it.”

“We have to act first,” said Artemis. “Haven won’t have its ships here for at least an hour. By then it will be too late. We need to find evidence so that Trouble can make a case to the Council.”

Holly’s fingers hesitated over Foaly’s phone. There wasn’t time to get into a strategy discussion with the commander. She knew Trouble’s mind well: it didn’t take that long to get to know. If she called him now, he would suggest a strategy that involved them waiting until he arrived, and possibly some form of bivouac.

So instead of making a vid-call, she sent a brief text highlighting Turnball Root’s name on the passenger list they weren’t supposed to have, and switched off the phone.

“He’s bound to call back,” she explained. “I’ll switch it on again when we have something to tell him.”

Foaly glowered at her. “I’m going to miss my crunchball league updates,” he said; then, “I know that sounds petty, but I pay a subscription.”

Artemis was concentrating on a problem to take his mind off the wall of sparkling fours that had followed him from his mind-screen and seemed to be hovering all around.

Not there, he told himself. Focus on the Houdini act.

“How did Turnball get out of the ship alive?” he wondered aloud. “Foaly, can we access local CCTV?”

“Not with this ship. This was once a beautiful emergency vehicle. I helped design the model. Talk about high spec—you could run an entire disaster-site cleanup from this beauty, once upon a time. Now there’s barely enough tech in here to stop us from crashing into a wall.”

“So there’s no way of telling if any ships rendezvoused with the prison shuttle?”

“Not from here,” said Foaly.

“I need to know how Turnball escaped,” shouted Artemis, losing his cool again. “How else am I supposed to find him? Doesn’t anyone else see this? Am I alone in the universe?”

Butler shifted until he sat hunched over Artemis, almost enfolding him with his bulk. “You’re the one who sees, Artemis. That’s your gift. We’re the ones who get there eventually.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Mulch. “I usually never get there. And when I do, I never like it, especially when Artemis is involved.”

A bead of sweat lodged in the frown wrinkle between Artemis’s eyes. “I know, old friend. I just need to work—that is the only thing that can save me.” He thought hard for a moment. “Can we run a scan to detect the ion trail of another ship?”

“Of course,” said Foaly. “Even this stripped-back tub can’t do without an omni-sensor.” He opened a program on the screen, and a dark blue filter dropped over their view. The ion trails of the rescue ships showed up as spectral beams following behind their engines like glowworms. One such beam led to the impact site from the direction of Atlantis, and another far more substantial column of light had plowed down from above.

“There’s the prison shuttle and there’s the probe. Nothing else. How did he do it?”

“Maybe he didn’t do it,” suggested Juliet. “Maybe his plan went wrong. A lot of geniuses have been totally screwing up lately, if you see what I am trying to say, Artemis.”

Artemis half-smiled. “I see what you are trying to say, Juliet. Mainly because you are saying it clearly and bluntly with no attempt to spare my feelings.”

“In fairness, Artemis,” said Juliet, “we were almost crushed to death by *mesmerized* wrestling fans, so I feel you can put up with a little ribbing. Also, I don’t work for you, so you can’t order me to shut up. You could dock Butler’s salary, I suppose, but I can live with that.”

Artemis nodded at Holly. “I don’t suppose you two could be related?” Then he jumped to his feet, almost bashing his head on the ship’s low ceiling. “Foaly, I need to go down there.”

Holly tapped the depth gauge. “No problem. I can come around behind that ridge and keep us hidden from the rescue ships. Even if they do see us, they’ll assume we’ve been sent by Haven. Worst-case scenario, they order us to back away from the crime scene.”

“I meant I need to go outside,” clarified Artemis.

“There’s a pressure suit in that cubby, and I need to take Foaly’s phone and search for clues the old-fashioned way.”

“The old-fashioned way,” repeated Mulch. “With a futuristic pressure suit and a fairy phone.”

A raft of vocal objections followed:

“You can’t go—it’s too dangerous.”

“I shall go in your place.”

“Why does it have to be my phone?”

Artemis waited until the clamor had died down, then dealt with the protests in his usual terse, patronizing manner.

“I must go because the next stage of Turnball’s plan obviously involves further loss of life, and the lives of many are more important than the lives of the few.”

“I saw that on *Star Trek*,” said Mulch.

“It must be me,” continued Artemis. “Because there is only one suit, and it appears to be approximately my size. And, if I’m not mistaken—and it would be highly unusual that I would be—a correct fit is vital, where pressure suits are concerned, unless you want your eyeballs popping out of their sockets.”

If someone else had said this, it might be considered a joke to lift the atmosphere, but from the mouth of Artemis Fowl it was a simple statement of fact.

“And finally, Foaly, it has to be your phone because, knowing your build standards as I do, it was made to withstand great pressures. Am I correct?”

“You are,” said Foaly, accepting the compliment with a nod of his long face. “About the fit of the suit too. These things won’t even seal properly if they don’t like your dimensions.”

Butler was not pleased, but in the end he was the employee, though Artemis did not play that card. “I must go, Butler,” said Artemis firmly. “My mind is eating me alive. I think the guilt is the main problem. I must do whatever I can to atone.”

“And?” said Butler, unconvinced.

Artemis held his arms out so that Foaly could drape the suit sleeves over them.

“And I will not be beaten by that jackass.”

“Jackass?” said Foaly, wounded. “My favorite uncle is a jackass.”

The pressure suit was actually two suits. The inner layer was a one-piece membrane threaded with life support, and the outer shell was body armor with a volatile surface that absorbed the water pressure and used it to power the servo mechanisms. Very clever, as you would expect from Koboi Laboratories.

“Koboi,” muttered Artemis, dismayed when he saw the logo. Even a person not obsessed with omens would be a little put out by his nemesis’s signature etched into the suit that was supposed to save his life. “I am not buoyed by that.”

“You are not supposed to be buoyed,” said Foaly, lowering the transparent helmet bubble. “You are supposed to be equalized.”

“I’m pretty sure that both of you just made really horrible jokes,” said Mulch, who was chewing something he had found somewhere. “But I’m not sure because I think you broke my funny bone.”

At this point, Mulch’s comments were like background chatter and were almost soothingly constant.

Foaly fixed his phone to an omni-sensor at the front of the helmet. “It would take a swipe from a whale’s tail to knock this loose. It’s good for any depths or pressure you are likely to encounter, and will even pick up the vibration of your speech and convert them to sound waves. But do try to

enunciate.”

“You stick close to the rock face,” said Butler, cradling the helmet to make sure Artemis was paying attention. “And at the first sign of trouble, *I’m* making the call to reel you in, not *you*. Do you understand, Artemis?”

Artemis nodded. The suit was connected to a dock on the ship’s hull by a signature electromagnetic beam, which would zap it back to base in case of emergency.

“Just have a quick look around the site with Foaly’s phone, and back you come. Ten minutes is all you get; then you’ll have to follow another lead. Got it?”

Another nod from Artemis, but it seemed more like he was shutting out something than actually listening to Butler’s words.

Butler snapped his fingers. “Focus, Artemis! Time enough for your Atlantis Complex later. We have the Atlantis *Trench* outside that door and six miles of water above it. If you want to stay alive, you need to stay alert.” He turned to Holly. “This is ridiculous. I’m pulling the plug.”

Holly’s mouth was a tight line as she shook her head. “Navy rules, Butler. You’re on my boat, you follow my orders.”

“As I remember, I brought the boat.”

“Yes, thanks for bringing my boat.”

Artemis used this exchange to move closer to the rear air lock, a tight space where Butler could not follow.

“Ten minutes, old friend,” he said, his voice robotic through the helmet speaker. “Then you can reel me back in.”

Butler suddenly thought about how Angeline Fowl would react when she heard about this latest escapade.

“Artemis, wait. There must be another way. . . .”

But his objection bounced off a wall of Perspex as the air lock dividing wall slid down with a noise like ball bearings rolling around the bottom of a can.

“I don’t like that ball-bearing noise,” said Mulch. “Doesn’t sound very watertight.”

No one argued. They knew what he meant.

* * *

On the other side of the divider, Artemis was having a few misgivings of his own. He had just noticed the mercenaries’ name for the ship, which was painted on the inside of the ocean door in what was supposed to look like blood but could not be or it would have long since washed off.

Probably some rubber-based solution, thought Artemis, but the base of the mercenaries’ paint was not what bothered him—it was the name itself, which was *Plunderer*, in Gnommish of course. The verb *plunder* was pronounced *ffurfor*, and the *er* suffix that changes the verb to a noun has, in Gnommish, the sound *fer*, which would imply that one is derived from the other. Grammar lesson aside, the pronunciation of the word *plunderer* was more or less *fourfourfour*.

Four four four, thought Artemis, pale inside his helmet.

Death death death.

At which point the hull door slid up with more ball-bearing noises, and the ocean sucked him into its deep dark depths.

Take a moment, thought Artemis as the suit’s outer skin vibrated and activated the glow orbs at his

temples, fingertips, and knees. Don't count, don't organize, just do as Butler advised and focus.

He did not feel *underwater*, though he knew he was. His body did not experience the expected resistance from the ocean, there was no dulling of the motor skills, and he felt as though he could move with the same fluency as he always did, though Butler would argue whether his movements were ever fluid.

Which would have been great, had not the giant squid, whose territory he had just invaded, wrapped this glowing intruder in ten fat limbs and whisked him off toward his lair.

Ah, the mythical giant squid. Genus *Architeuthis*, thought Artemis, strangely calm now that he was faced with a catastrophe worthy of all the worrying he'd been doing. Not so mythical anymore.

FORBIDDEN LOVE

TURNBALL Root had met Leonor Carsby on the remote Hawaiian island of Lehua in the summer of 1938. Leonor was there because she had crash-landed her Lockheed Electra into the northern slope of the island's volcanic ridge and freewheeled into the oddly shaped natural canal known as The Keyhole, which cut through the island. Turnball had been there because he'd maintained a winter residence on the otherwise uninhabited island, where he liked to drink wine and listen to jazz recordings while he planned his next heist.

They were an unlikely couple, but their first meeting took place in the kind of extreme circumstances that often cause hearts to beat faster and believe themselves in love.

Leonor Carsby was a human Manhattan heiress, but also a founding member of the Ninety-Nines, an organization of women in aviation first presided over by Amelia Earhart. When Earhart was lost in the Pacific, Leonor Carsby vowed that she herself would complete the journey that her friend and hero Amelia had begun.

In April 1938 she took off from California with a navigator and extra-large fuel tanks. Six weeks later, Leonor Carsby arrived in The Keyhole with neither, having lost both to Lehua's cruel crescent-shaped ridge. It was a miracle she herself survived, improbably protected only by the Lockheed's bubble cockpit.

On his daily patrol, Unix had come across the heiress spread-eagled on a flat rock at the water's edge. She was not in good shape: dehydrated, one leg badly broken, delirious, and on the edge of death.

The sprite called it in, expecting to be given the execution order, but something about the human woman's face on his screen interested Turnball. He instructed Unix not to do anything, but to wait for his arrival.

Turnball took the trouble to shave, draw his hair back into a ponytail, and put on a fresh ruffled shirt before taking the lift from the subterranean cave to the surface. There he found Unix squatting over the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. Even twisted unnaturally and covered with blood and bruises, it was clear to Turnball that she was an exquisite beauty.

As he stood over Leonor, with the sun behind him, casting long shadows across his face, the aviatrix opened her eyes, took Turnball in, and said two words: "My God." And then she was lost to delirium once more.

Turnball was intrigued. He felt a thaw around a heart, which had been frozen for decades. Who was this woman who had fallen from the skies?

"Bring her inside," he told Unix. "Use whatever magic we have to make her well."

Unix did as he was told without comment, as was his way. Many other lieutenants might have questioned the wisdom of using the gang's dwindling supply of magic on a human. There was a newbie in the group who still had half a tank in him. When that was gone, who knew how long it would be before they had power again?

But Unix did not complain, and neither did the others, as they were all aware that Turnball Root did not handle moaning well, and moaners tended to find themselves stranded somewhere uncomfortable, waiting for something extremely painful to happen to them.

So Leonor Carsby was taken into the subterranean cave and nursed back to health. Turnball did not

involve himself too much during the early stages, preferring to show up when Leonor was on the point of waking up so he could pretend he had been there the whole time. Initially, Leonor did nothing but heal and sleep, but after some weeks she began to speak, hesitantly at first, but then questions tumbled out of her so quickly that Turnbull could hardly keep up.

“Who are you?”

“What are you?”

“How did you find me?”

“Is Pierre, my navigator, alive?”

“When will I be fit to travel?”

Generally, Turnbull handled questions about as well as he handled moaning, but from Leonor Carsby, every question caused him to smile indulgently and answer in detail.

Why is this? he wondered. Why do I tolerate this human instead of simply tossing her to the sharks in the normal fashion? I am spending time and magic on her in extravagant amounts.

Turnball began thinking about Leonor’s face when he wasn’t looking at it. Water chimes reminded him of her laugh. Sometimes he was sure he could hear her call to him, though he was on the far side of the island.

Grow up, you fool, he told himself. Yours is not the heart of a romantic.

But the heart cannot lie, and Turnbull Root found himself in love with Leonor Carsby. He canceled two raids on federal bullion sites to be by her side, and moved his office to her room so he could work while she slept.

And, for her part, Leonor loved him too. She knew he was not human, but still she loved him. He told her about everything but the violence. Turnbull styled himself as a revolutionary on the run from an unjust state, and she believed it. Why wouldn’t she? He was the dashing hero who had saved her, and Turnbull made sure none of his cronies shattered this illusion.

When Leonor was well enough, Turnbull took her to Mount Everest in his shuttle, and she cried tears of amazement. As they hovered there, shrouded by the cold white mist, Turnbull asked the question he had been wanting to ask for two months.

“That first moment, my dear, when your eyes met mine, you said, ‘My God.’ Why did you say that?”

Leonor dried her eyes. “I was half dead, Turnbull. You’ll laugh and think me silly.”

Root took her hand. “I could never think that. Never.”

“Very well. I shall tell you. I said those words, Turnbull, because I thought I had died and you were a fierce, handsome angel come to take me to heaven.”

Turnball did not laugh, and he did not think it was silly. He knew at that moment that this gorgeous petite woman was the love of his life and he had to have her.

So when Leonor began talking of her return to New York, and how Turnbull would be the sensation of the city, he pricked the ball of his thumb with a quill, drew a thrall rune with the blood, and prepared himself a supper of mandrake and rice wine.

Venice, Italy; Now

The giant amorphobot bore Turnbull Root to his beloved, who waited for him at the basement dock to their house in Venice. The house stood four stories high and had been commissioned by Turnbull himself in 1798 and built from the finest reconstituted Italian marble mixed with fairy polymers, which would absorb the gradual shift of the city without cracking. It took several hours to make the

journey, during which time the amorphobot kept Turnball and his men alive by periodically surfacing to replenish its cells with oxygen and spiking their arms with saline drips for nourishment. As they traveled, Turnball logged on to the computer in the amor-phobot's belly to ensure that all was ready for the next stage of his plan.

Turnball found that he was very comfortable working in this sheltered environment with the world flashing by. He was insulated yet in control.

Safe.

From the corner of his eye, through the bleary mask of gel, Turnball was aware that Bobb Ragby and Ching Mayle now regarded him with something approaching worship, following the spectacular nature of their escape. Worship. He liked that.

As they approached the Italian coast, Turnball felt his calm smugness desert him, as a nervous serpent crawled into his stomach.

Leonor. How I have missed you.

Since Turnball had acquired a computer, there had been barely a day when they had not written to each other, but Leonor refused to participate in video calls, and of course Turnball knew why.

You will always be beautiful to me, my darling.

The amorphobot thrummed the length of Venice's Grand Canal, skirting the mounds of rubbish and corpses of murdered princes, until it stopped in front of the only subaquatic gate with an omni-sensor. The bot winked at the sensor, and the sensor winked back, and now that everyone was all pally, the gate opened without blasting them with the recessed Neutrino lances on its pillars.

Turnball winked at his crew. "Thank goodness for that, eh? Sometimes that gate is a little unfriendly." It was difficult to talk with the slow surge of gel over one's teeth, but Turnball felt the comment was worth it. Leonor would like that one.

Turnball's crew did not answer; their accomodation inside the gel bot was a little more cramped than their captain's. They were squished together like salted slugs in a cone.

The bot elongated itself to flow easily down the narrow channel to Turnball's underground dock. Strip lights glowed in the gloom, drawing them underneath the house. Deeper and deeper they went, until at last the bot expelled Turnball gently onto a sloping slipway. He straightened his coat, tightened his ponytail, and walked slowly along the ramp toward the slight figure waiting in the shadows.

"Put the others to sleep," he told the bot. "I need to talk to my wife."

A plasma charge crackled through the bot, knocking out the fairies inside. Unix barely had time to roll his eyes before passing out.

Turnball took a halting step, nervous as a teenage elf about to take his first moon flight.

"Leonor? Darling. I have come home to you. Come and kiss me."

His wife hobbled forward from the blackness, leaning heavily on an ivory-topped cane. Her fingers were gnarled, with glowing rheumatoid knuckles, her body was angular and unnatural, with sharp bones stretching the heavy lace of her skirt. One eye drooped, and the other was closed completely, and the lines on her face were scored deep by time and black with shadows.

"Turnball. As handsome as ever. It is so wonderful to see you free." Leonor's voice was a mere rasp, labored and painful.

"Now that you are home," she said, haltingly, "I can allow myself to die."

Turnball's heart lurched. He had palpitations, and a red band of heat tightened about his forehead. Everything he had ever done suddenly seemed all for nothing.

“You cannot die,” he said furiously, rubbing the pad of his thumb, heating the rune. “I love you, I need you.”

Leonor’s eyelids fluttered. “I cannot die,” she repeated.

“But why not, Turnball? I am too old for life. Only my longing to see you again has kept me alive, but my time has passed. I regret nothing, except that I never flew again. I wanted to, but I didn’t. . . . Why was that?”

My hold is weakening. The old spell has died.

“You chose a life with me, my darling,” he said, rushing the last steps to her side. “But now that I have found the secret to eternal youth, you can be young again, and soon you will fly wherever you want to go.”

Turnball felt the tiniest pressure as her fragile hand squeezed his fingers. “I would like that, my dear.”

“Of course you would,” said Turnball, steering his wife to the basement elevator. And now you should rest. I have a lot to organize before we leave.”

Leonor allowed herself to be led, feeling, as always, powerless to resist her charismatic husband.

“That’s my Turnball. Always coming to my rescue. One of these days I will rescue you.”

“You do rescue me,” said Turnball sincerely. “*Every day.*”

A barb of guilt pricked his heart, as he knew he could never allow Leonor to fly again. For if she could fly, then she might fly away.

Turnball was shocked and frightened by how feeble Leonor had become. Somehow, the simple act of marrying a fairy had slowed down her aging process, but now it seemed that he could delay her decline no longer. Turnball took his fear for his wife, turned it into rage, and pointed it at his crew.

“We have a historic opportunity here,” he shouted at the small group, who were assembled in the second-story library, “to strike a blow at the heart of our ancient enemy and also secure a supply of magic that will never run dry. If one of you useless jail rats fails in his task, there will be nowhere on this earth you can hide from me. I will hunt you down and peel the skin from your head. Do you understand?”

They understood. Historically, Turnball’s threats were usually vague and stylish—when he got down to specifics, then the captain was close to the edge.

“Good. Good.” Turnball took a breath. “Is everything ready, Quartermaster?”

Quartermaster Ark Sool stepped forward. Sool was an unusually tall gnome who had, until quite recently, been an internal affairs officer for the LEP. Having been demoted to private following an investigation into the ethics of his own methods, Sool had cashed in whatever years he had and decided that he would use the accumulated knowledge of decades of criminal investigation to make himself some of the gold that gnomes were almost hypnotically attracted to. He’d advertised his services at The Sozzled Parrot and had soon been picked up by Turnball, anonymously at first, but now they were meeting face-to-face.

“Everything is ready, Captain,” he said, tones clipped, back straight. “The shuttle we acquired from the LEP pound has been fitted out as an Atlantis ambulance. And I managed to trim the budget quite a bit and took the liberty of ordering a few new dress suits for you.”

“Excellent work, Quartermaster,” said Turnball. “Your share has just gone up three percent. Initiative pays. Never forget that.”

He rubbed his hands. “How soon can we leave?”

“As soon as you give the word, Captain. The ambulance is on the jetty and ready for push off.”

“The laser?”

“Modified as requested. Small enough to fit in your pocket.”

“I find myself liking you quite a bit, Sool. Keep it up and soon you will be a full partner.”

Sool bowed slightly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Any casualties while you were doing the shopping?”

“Not on our side, sir,” said Sool.

“And who cares about the other side, eh?”

Turnball liked the idea of blood being spilled. It made the entire exercise seem worthwhile.

“Now, we all know I am a selfish fairy—that’s what’s kept us alive and prospering, apart from our recent stint at the Council’s pleasure. If I get what I want, then we all flourish. And what I want is a source of magic strong enough to make my wife young again. And if that source of magic can also make your dreams come true, so much the better. Until recently, there was no everlasting source, but now the demons have returned from Limbo, bringing a mighty warlock with them. A young demon who has taken the unusual name of N^o1.”

“A smarmy little upstart,” said Sool. “Won’t salute or wear a uniform.”

“I’m taking one percent of your share back for interrupting,” said Turnball gently. “Do it again and I’ll take an arm.”

Sool opened his mouth to apologize, but on consideration decided that another little bow would suffice.

“You’re new. You’ll learn. And if you don’t, at least Mr. Ragby will have a nice meal. He loves limbs.”

Ragby made the point by gnashing his large teeth.

“So, to continue uninterrupted, there is now a demon warlock in Haven. If we can take him, then he shields us forever and he brings my Leonor back to me. Questions?”

Bobb Ragby raised a finger.

“Yes, Mr. Ragby?”

“Won’t this N^o1 be hard to get to?”

“Ah, excellent question, Mr. Ragby. Not quite as stupid as you appear, after all. And you are right. *Generally*, a person of this importance would be hidden away like the last stink worm at a dwarf sludge pool party, but in the event of a disaster at sea, where the medical staff are stretched to their limits, such a powerful warlock will be pressed into service by the medical warlocks. So we will find him in the aquanaut *Nostremius*, the floating hospital.”

A broad smile spread across Ragby’s face. “And we have a fake ambulance.”

“We do indeed, Bobb. You put things together quickly.”

Ching had a question too. “A person like that, with all this power, surely the LEP are going to come after a person like that?”

This was exactly the question Turnball wanted asked. He was delighted by how this presentation was going. “Let me answer your question with one of my own, just to get your mind working, because I have faith that you’re not just a stupid goblin. Do you know why I had the space probe crash into the prison shuttle?”

Ching’s reptilian face wrinkled in concentration, and he absently licked his eyeballs as he thought. “I think you done that so the Leppers would assume we were dead.”

“Correct, Mr. Mayle. I orchestrated a huge catastrophe so everyone would believe we had been killed.” Turnball shrugged. “I don’t feel bad about that. We are at war with the Leppers, as you call them. If you take sides in a war, then you can expect to be a target. I might feel a little bad about the next catastrophe. I’m a little sentimental about hospitals: I was born in one.”

Bobb raised the same finger again. “Uh, Captain, was that a joke?”

Turnball beamed a charming smile. “Why, yes it was, Mr. Ragby.”

Bobb Ragby started to laugh.

The Atlantis Trench; Now

Artemis Fowl felt the tentacles of the giant squid tighten around him. Saucer-sized spherical suckers latched on to his pressure suit, slobbering on the surface, searching for purchase. Each cup was lined with rings of razor-sharp chitin teeth, which gnashed viciously on Artemis’s protected limbs and torso.

Eight arms, if I remember correctly, thought Artemis. Which is two fours. Die! Die!

Artemis almost giggled. Even in the death grip of the biggest squid ever to be seen by a man, he was persisting with his compulsive behavior.

It won’t be long now before I am counting my words again.

When the squid’s biting suckers could not gain access to the tender meat inside, it held Artemis away from the giant mantle.

The next stage of the squid’s assault was to batter Artemis with one of its two longer tentacles, which it swung like a mace. Artemis felt the jarring blow, but his suit did not rupture.

“One two three four five,” shouted Artemis defiantly. “Wear the suit and stay alive.”

Number poetry. Back to square one.

Three times more, the squid struck and then it drew Artemis close in circling bands of fat tentacle and took his entire head inside its gnashing beak. The noise was exactly what Artemis had always imagined it would sound like if a giant squid tried to crack his sea helmet.

If I get out of this, I will start thinking about girls like a normal fifteen-year-old.

After several heart-stopping minutes, the squid apparently gave up and dashed Artemis down in a nest of bones and sea junk that it had assembled on a high shelf at the side of an underwater cliff.

Artemis lay on his back and watched as the creature expanded its mantle cavity, filled it with hundreds of gallons of seawater, then contracted the mantle, shooting itself into the near pitch black of deep water.

Artemis felt that in the circumstances, a slang word was justified.

“Wow,” he breathed. “Of all the things that have almost killed me, that was the most fearsome.”

After several minutes, Artemis’s heart rate slowed enough to extinguish the flashing heart readout on his suit, and he felt that he could move without throwing up.

“I’ve moved position,” he said into his helmet, in case Foaly’s phone, which was stuck into the helmet over his forehead, was still actually functional. “I intend to try and take some bearings so you can come and rescue me.”

“Moved position?” said Foaly’s voice, which was transmitted faintly by vibration through the helmet’s polymer, so that it seemed to come from everywhere. “That’s an understatement. We’re going to try to catch up.”

“Look for landmarks,” said another voice, Butler. “We can use them to triangulate with Foaly’s phone and pinpoint your position.”

This was a hopeful plan at best, but Artemis felt that it was better to have something to do other than just wait for his air to run out.

“Actually, how much air do I have?”

Foaly, of course, was the one to answer that technical question. “The suit has functioning gills that draw oxygen from the ocean, so it will keep breathing long after you’re dead, so to speak. Not that you’re going to die.”

Artemis turned over and raised himself onto all fours. Any difficulty he experienced was due to his body being in shock from the cephalopod attack, and not the pressure suit, which was functioning perfectly and which would later go on to win an industry award for its performance that day.

Take five steps, Artemis urged himself. Just five. Whatever you do, don’t stop at . . . one less than five.

Artemis took five shuffling steps, feeling his way along the ledge, carefully avoiding shuffling off into the abyss. He could probably survive the drop, but he had no desire to have to climb back up again.

“I’m on a long flat ledge, on the lip of the trench,” he said softly, anxious not to disturb any vibration-sensitive creatures—sharks, for example.

He realized that the squid had dropped him into some kind of nest. Perhaps the creature did not actually sleep here, but it seemed to feed in the spot and collect things that interested it. There were several skeletons, including the gigantic ribbed remains of a sperm whale, which Artemis first mistook for a shipwreck. There were small boats, huge brass propellers, great chunks of gleaming quartz, phosphorescent rocks, various crates, and even a mangled orange deep-sea submarine with grinning skeletons inside.

Artemis moved quickly away from the craft, even though his intellect assured him that the skeletons could not harm him.

Pardon me if I don’t completely trust my intellect these days.

He noticed that in all this rubble there did not appear to be any fairy-made articles, even with Atlantis just over the crest.

Then Artemis saw that he was mistaken. There was, no more than thirty feet from him, a small, slick, metallic computer cube with unmistakable fairy markings which seemed to float just above the surface of the ledge.

No, wait, not floating. Suspended in gel.

Artemis poked the gel gingerly, and when there was no reaction apart from a gentle fizzling spark, he plunged his sheathed hand into the gel up to the shoulder, grasping the cube by a corner. With the aid of the suit’s servo motors, he easily pulled it free.

Wreckage from the probe, perhaps, he thought, then said aloud, “I have something. It could be pertinent. Are you seeing this, Foaly?”

There was no reply.

I need to get back to the ship, or into the crash crater. Somewhere away from the giant squid, which wants to nibble my flesh and suck my marrow.

Artemis immediately regretted thinking the suck-my-marrow bit, as it was far too graphic, and now he felt like throwing up again.

I don’t even know which way to go, he realized. This entire venture was ill-advised. What were the chances I would find a clue at the bottom of the ocean?

An ironic statement, as it would turn out, because he held a vital clue in his hands.

Artemis swung his head this way and that, to see if whatever was caught in the beams of his helmet could spark off an idea. Nothing. Just an almost transparent fish propelling its bloated body with stubby fins, and filtering plankton through its circular nostrils.

I need something to happen, thought Artemis a little desperately. The idea had occurred to him that he was lost alone underneath six miles of crushing ocean with not much of an idea of what to do next. Artemis had always performed well under pressure, but that was usually the intellectual pressure a person might experience at the end of a taxing chess match, not the kind of pressure that could splinter a person's bones and squeeze every bubble of air from their lungs. Actual water pressure.

As it turned out, *something* did happen: the squid came back, and it bore in the grip of its larger tentacles what appeared to be the space probe's nose cone.

I wonder what he wants that for? wondered Artemis. It's almost as if he's actually manipulating a tool.

But to what end? What nut would a giant squid wish to crack?

"Me," Artemis blurted. "I'm the nut."

Artemis could have sworn the squid winked at him before bringing the five-ton chunk of spacecraft swinging down toward the morsel of meat in its blue shell.

"I'm the nut!" Artemis shouted again, a little hysterically, it must be said. He backpedaled along the ledge, the suit's motors lending him a little speed. Just enough feet per second to feel the force of the swing, but not the metal itself. The probe's prow cut through the rock like a cleaver through soft meat and carved a V-shaped trench that ran between the soles of Artemis's feet.

So much for being a genius, thought Artemis bitterly. One grand gesture and I'm fish food.

The squid yanked its weapon free from the rock and raised it high, pumping its mantle cavity full of water for the next effort. Artemis's back was literally against the wall. He had nowhere to go, and made an easy target.

"Butler!" called Artemis, purely out of habit. He had no real expectation that his bodyguard could miraculously materialize at his side, and even if he did, it would just be to die there.

The squid closed one huge eye, taking careful aim.

These things are smarter than scientists think, thought Artemis. I do wish I had been able to write a paper.

The prow came hammering down, compressing water then pushing it aside. Metal filled Artemis's vision, and it occurred to him that this was the second time this particular prow had almost crushed him.

Except this time it's not almost.

But it was to be *almost*. An orange circle pulsed in Artemis's helmet readout, and he prayed that it was a sign that an electromagnetic connection had been established between his suit and the ship.

It was. Artemis felt a gentle tug, then a fierce one that yanked him off the ledge straight up toward the hovering mercenary craft. In the light of his suit beams he could see a magnetic plate in the ship's belly. Underneath him the squid abandoned its improvised mallet and bunched itself for pursuit.

I'll probably slow down before I hit that plate, Artemis thought hopefully.

He didn't, but the impact hurt a lot less than a blow from an armed giant squid.

Generally, the diver would be taken inside immediately, but in this case Holly decided that it would be best to leave Artemis where he was, and put a little distance between them and the squid, which Artemis would later agree was the correct decision even though at the time he was screaming. Artemis craned his head around to see the massive dome of the squid's head jetting after him,

tentacles behind rippling like skipping ropes—skipping ropes with razor-lined suckers and enough power to crush an armored vehicle, not to mention the ability to manipulate tools.

“Holly!” he shouted. “If you can hear me, go faster!”

Apparently she could hear him.

Holly took the ship deep into the impact crater, and when she was absolutely sure the squid was off their scopes, she flipped the magnetic plate, and Artemis was dumped into the air lock, still clutching the fairy box to his chest.

“Hey, look,” said Mulch, once the air lock had drained. “It’s the nut.” He ran in small circles around the bay, squealing, “I’m the nut. I’m the nut.” The dwarf stopped for a laugh. “He cracks me up, really.”

Butler hurried to Artemis’s side. “Cut him some slack, Diggums. He just tangled with a giant squid.”

Mulch was not impressed. “I once ate one of those things. A big one, not a minnow like that fellow.”

Butler helped Artemis with the helmet. “Anything broken? Can you move your fingers and toes? What is the capital of Pakistan?”

Artemis coughed and stretched his neck. “Nothing broken. Digits all mobile, and the capital of Pakistan is Islamabad, which is noteworthy for having been built to *be* the capital.”

“Okay, Artemis,” said Butler. “You’re fine. I won’t ask you to count to five.”

“I would rather count *in* fives, if you don’t mind. Foaly, congratulations on building such a sturdy phone with an excellent tracking program.”

Holly hit the water flaps to slow the ship’s forward motion. “Did you find anything?”

Artemis held out the hardware cube. “Wreckage from the probe. This was covered in some kind of gel. Interesting texture, loaded with crystals. Something of yours, Foaly?”

The centaur clopped over and took the small metal box. “It’s the heart from an amorphobot,” he said fondly. “These little guys were the perfect foragers. They could absorb anything, including each other.”

“Maybe they absorbed this Turnball guy and his buddies,” said Juliet, half joking.

Artemis was about to explain in patronizingly simple terms exactly why this wasn’t possible, when it occurred to him that it was indeed possible—not only that, it was probable.

“They weren’t programmed to act as rescue vehicles,” said Foaly.

Holly scowled. “If you tell me one more time that those amorphobots weren’t programmed to do something, then I will have to shave your hindquarters while you sleep.”

Artemis crawled to the steel bench. “Are you saying that you people knew about these amorphobots all the time?”

“Of course we did. They attacked us in Iceland. Remember?”

“No. I was unconscious.”

“That’s right. Seems like ages ago.”

“So I endured trial by squid for nothing?”

“Oh no. Not for nothing. It would have taken me minutes to make the connection, and even then it would only have been a theory.” Foaly typed a code into his phone, releasing it from the pressure suit’s helmet. “Whereas now we can check the programming.”

Foaly hooked his phone to the bot’s brain and was delighted to see its readout light up. He ran a

few checks and was easily able to pinpoint the shadow program. “This is a little puzzling. The bot was sent new mission parameters by the control orb. Charmingly enough, it’s actually telling its gel to kill us all right now. That’s why we never detected any outside interference—there was none. It’s a simple little shadow program, a few lines of code, that’s all. Simple to kill.” He did so with a few taps of the keyboard.

“Where is this control orb?” asked Artemis.

“It’s in my lab, in Haven.”

“Could it have been tampered with?”

Foaly didn’t have to think about this for long. “Impossible, and I’m not just being typical me and denying that my equipment is responsible. I check that thing most days. I ran a systems check yesterday, and there was nothing out of the ordinary in the orb’s history. Whoever set this up has been feeding the probe instructions for weeks, if not months.”

Artemis closed his eyes to blot out the shining fours that had appeared in his vision, floating around the craft’s interior, hissing malignantly.

I manage to survive a giant squid attack, and now I’m worried about hissing fours. Great.

“I need everyone to sit in a line, on the opposite bench, small to tall.”

“That’s the Atlantis Complex talking, Mud Boy,” said Holly. “Fight it.”

Artemis pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “Please, Holly. For me.”

Mulch was delighted with this game. “Should we hold hands, or chant? How about: *five keeps me alive, four makes my bottom sore?*”

“Number poetry?” said Artemis skeptically. “That’s ridiculous. Please, sit where I ask.”

They did, reluctantly and grumbling, Foaly and Mulch arguing for a moment over who was smaller. There was no argument over who was tallest. Butler sat hunched at the end, chin almost between his knees. Beside him sat Juliet, then Foaly, then Mulch, and finally Holly, who had set the ship on neutral.

Five, thought Artemis. Five friends to keep me alive.

He sat, still clad in the pressure exoskeleton suit, watching his friends and taking strength, letting his ideas build.

Finally he said, “Foaly, there must have been a second orb.”

Foaly nodded. “There was. We always grow a backup. In this case we used the clone, because the original was damaged. Only minor damage, true, but you can’t take chances with space travel. The first was sent off to be incinerated.”

“Where?”

“Atlantis. Koboi Labs got the contract. This was obviously before we realized how deranged Opal is.”

“So, if we accept that Turnball Root got hold of the second orb and had it repaired by Vishby, or whoever else worked for him, then would the probe obey commands from that orb?”

“Of course. No questions asked. They could be sent by any computer with a satellite link.”

Butler raised a finger. “Can I say something?”

“Of course, old friend.”

“Foaly. Your security sucks. When are you guys going to learn? A few years ago the goblins built a shuttle, and now you have convicts running your space program.”

Foaly stamped a hoof. “Hey, pal, less of the judgmental attitude. We’ve stayed hidden for thousands of years. That’s how good our security is.”

“Five ten fifteen twenty,” shouted Artemis. “Please. We need to work quickly.”

“Can we tease you about this later?” said Mulch. “I have some great material.”

“Later,” said Artemis. “For now, we need to work out where Turnball is going and what his final objective is.”

When there was no argument, he continued. “If we assume that Turnball used his orb to control the probe, and used these amorphobots to carry him away, can we track the amorphobots?”

Foaly’s head movement was somewhere between a nod and a shake. “Possibly. But not for long.”

Artemis understood. “The gel dissipates in salt water.”

“That’s right. The friction between the water and the bots wears down the gel, but as soon as it separates from the brain, it begins to dissolve. No charge, no cohesion. I’d say with a melon-sized bubble, you might get a few hours.”

“It’s already been a few hours. How much longer do we have?”

“It may already be too late. If I was allowed out of my school desk, I might be able to tell you.”

“Of course, please.”

Foaly swung his arms forward, lifting himself from his awkward seated position, and clopped into the cockpit, where he quickly entered the gel’s chemical makeup into the gyro’s rudimentary computer and dropped a filter over the portholes.

“Luckily for us, the mercenaries decided to leave the scanners intact. Everyone pick a window. I’ve run a scan for a specific radiation, and the gel trail should show up as a luminous green. Shout if you see something.”

They all took a porthole, except Holly, who sat in the pilot’s chair, ready to take off in whichever direction the trail led.

“I see it!” said Mulch. “No, wait. It’s a really angry squid looking for his little nut. Sorry. I know that was inappropriate, but I’m hungry.”

“There,” called Juliet. “I see something, portside.”

Artemis switched to her porthole. Winding from the depths of the crater was a wispy stream of shining bubbles that disappeared as they watched it, the lower bubbles separating into smaller blobs, then toward the end of the trail, some were disappearing altogether.

“Quickly, Holly,” said Artemis urgently. “Follow those bubbles.”

Holly opened the throttle. “Now there’s an order I never thought I’d hear from you,” she said.

They sped after the bubble trail in the mercenaries’ gyro, though Foaly did argue that technically they were not bubbles but globules, for which information he received a punch on the shoulder from Juliet.

“Hey, don’t punch me,” protested the centaur.

“Technically, that was a rap, not a punch,” corrected Juliet. “Now this . . . this is a punch.”

The trail grew fainter before their eyes, and Holly quickly programmed in a projected course whenever the globules changed direction, just in case they disappeared altogether.

Artemis sat in the copilot’s chair with a hand over one eye and his second hand in front of his face.

“The thumb is generally acknowledged to be a finger,” he told Holly. “In which case we’re safe, because that makes five fingers. But some experts argue that the thumb is completely different and is one of the things that sets us apart from the animals, and in that case we only have four fingers on each hands. And that’s bad.”

He’s getting worse, thought Holly anxiously.

Butler was stumped. If someone were threatening Artemis, the correct protective action was

usually pretty obvious: *Clobber the bad guy and confiscate his weapon.* But now the bad guy was Artemis's own mind, and it was turning him against everyone, including Butler.

How can I trust any order Artemis gives me? the bodyguard wondered. It could simply be a ruse to get me out of the way. Just like Mexico.

He squatted beside Artemis. "You do have faith in me now, don't you, Artemis?"

Artemis tried to meet his eyes but couldn't manage it. "I'm trying, old friend. I want to, but I know that soon I won't have the strength. I need help, and soon."

They both knew what Artemis wasn't saying: *I need help before I go out of my mind entirely.*

They followed the gel trail eastward through the Atlantic and around the tip of Gibraltar into the Med. In the early afternoon the trail died suddenly. The last green bubble popped, and suddenly they were fifty feet underwater, two miles outside the Golfo di Venezia with nothing but yachts and gondolas in the gyro's scopes.

"It has to be Venice," said Holly, bringing the ship to periscope depth, taking the opportunity to fill the air tanks and equalize. "It's right in front of us."

"Venice is a big city," said Butler. "And not an easy place to search. How are we going to find these guys?"

The amorphobot brain in Foaly's hand suddenly beeped as it established a link with its brethren. "I don't think that's going to be a problem. They're close. Very close. Very, very close."

Artemis was not happy with his melodramatic statement. "*Very, very close?* Really, Foaly? You're a scientist. How close, exactly?"

Foaly pointed to the gyro's hatch. "That close."

The next minute or two were frantic and seemed to have an entire day's worth of happenings compressed into a few moments. To Artemis and Foaly, the whole thing was just flashes of color and blurred movement. Butler, Holly, and Juliet saw a little more, being trained soldiers. Butler even managed to get off the bench, which did him absolutely no good whatsoever.

The gyro's hatch made a sound like a giant plastic bottle being stepped on by a giant foot, then simply disappeared. Rather, it appeared to disappear. It was actually torn backward with great force then hurled into the sky. The hatch eventually lodged in the shaft of the bell tower of San Marco Piazza, which caused quite a bit of consternation in the city, especially for the painter whose rope was severed by the spinning hatch, and who plummeted a hundred feet to land on his brother's back. The brothers were already fighting, and this didn't make things any better.

Back in the gyro, water immediately began flooding the ship's interior, but most of the available space was filled by the rolling forms of six amorphobots, which flowed into the bay, chittering as they selected their targets. It was all over in less than a second. The bots pounced on their targets, quickly engulfing them in turgid gel, and spirited them into the azure blue of the Mediterranean.

As they were whisked toward the murky form of a fairy ship in the depths, each prisoner had his or her own thoughts about what had happened.

Artemis was stunned by how much this abduction reminded him of his time spent battling through the mind-screen in his own brain.

Holly wondered if her weapon would work inside the gunk, or if it had been disabled yet again.

Foaly couldn't help feeling a little fondness for the amorphobot that held him prisoner; after all, he had grown it in a lab beaker.

Juliet tried to keep Butler in sight. So long as she could see her brother, she felt reasonably safe.

Butler thrashed for a moment, but quickly realized that his efforts were futile, and so drew himself in like a newborn, conserving his energy for one explosive movement.

Mulch was also considering an explosive movement. Maybe he couldn't escape, but he could certainly make this blobby thing regret picking him up. The dwarf pulled his knees slowly to his chest and allowed the gas in his tubes to collect into long bubbles. Eventually he would have enough force to blast through, or else he would be left floating in what would look like the world's largest lava lamp.

* * *

Turnball Root was having a reasonably good time. He would have been having a wonderful time but for the fact that his darling Leonor was not in the condition he would like her to be, and he was worried that if he was able to restore Leonor's faculties, she would quickly tumble to the fact that he was not quite the principled revolutionary he had always pretended to be, and he would lose her love. Leonor had a strong sense of morality, and she would definitely kick up a fuss at the idea of him imprisoning a demon warlock to keep her forever young. Turnball glanced at the thrall rune on his thumb. The intricate set of spirals and characters that had kept Leonor on the hook, but the power of which was weakening all the time. Would she have left him without it? Maybe. Probably.

Turnball was possibly the world's foremost expert on runes. They suited his situation, as they only required a tiny spark of magic to kick-start them, and thereafter operated on the power of the symbols themselves. Different people reacted differently to rune control. Some could be controlled for decades while others would reject the black magic and go instantly insane. Leonor had been the ideal thrall because a large part of her wanted to believe what Turnball told her.

With his modified laser, Turnball could enslave anyone he wished, for as long as he wished, no matter how they felt about him, and without the need for a single spark of magic.

Like these new prisoners, for example. A veritable treasure chest of talents at his disposal. One never knew when a teenage mastermind would come in handy, or a technical centaur, especially when it was well known that the little demon trusted them both. With those two and the warlock, he could start his own principality if he chose to.

Yes, I am having a reasonably good time, thought Turnball. But soon I will be having an excellent time. Just one more set of people to kill. Maybe two.

The amorphobots had entered the ambulance through the air lock and morphed into one in the ambulance's only cell. Actually, the bot holding Mulch Diggums was excluded from the morph, as the other bots could not identify the chemical spectrum of the gas bubbles inside the dwarf's body, and did not frankly like the look of Mulch anyway, and so, though it tried to meld with the others, the bot was repulsed and wobbled lonely in the corner.

Turnball Root descended the spiral staircase from the bridge and literally swaggered into the cell to gloat.

"Look here," he said to Unix, who stood at his shoulder, grim as ever. "The finest fairy and human minds all gathered together in one cell."

They hung before him suspended in smart gel, unable to do much besides take shallow breaths and move like sleepy swimmers.

"Don't even bother making the effort to call for help or shoot your way out," Turnball continued. "I am jamming your phones and weapons." He leaned close to the bot's shimmering surface. "Here's one of Julius's little pups. Didn't we shoot her already, Unix?"

A leery smile tightened the sprite's jaw, though it did not make him seem like a nicer person.

"And the great Foaly. Savior of the People. Not anymore, my little pony. Soon you will be my thrall, and delighted to be so." Turnball wiggled his thumbs at the captives, and they could see the red runes painted there.

"And what have we here?" Turnball stopped in front of the Butlers. "Crazy Bear and the Jade Princess. I missed you once before, but it won't happen a second time."

"What about me?" Mulch managed to say, and the bot translated the vibrations of his larynx into sound.

"What about you?"

"Don't I get a description? I'm dangerous too."

Turnball laughed, but softly so the noise would not awaken Leonor, who slept in the berth upstairs. "I like you, dwarf. You have spirit, but nonetheless I shall kill you, as you are of no use to me, unless you fancy a position as jester. A fat, smelly jester. Obviously I am assuming that you smell bad. You certainly look as though you might."

Turnball moved on to Artemis. "And, of course, Artemis Fowl. Ex-criminal mastermind and current psychotic. How is the Complex going, Artemis? I bet you have a *bad* number. What is it, five? Four?" Artemis must have flinched because Turnball knew he had guessed correctly. "Four, then. And how do I know you suffer from Atlantis? You should ask your *friend* Foaly. He's the one who supplies me with pictures."

Artemis was not at all surprised to find that some of his paranoia was actually justified.

Turnball paced along the line like a general delivering a prebattle pep talk. "I am delighted that you are all here, genuinely delighted. Because you can be useful to me. You see, my wife is very old, and to save her life and bring her youth back, I need a very powerful magician."

Artemis's eyes widened. He got it straight away. All of this to lure N^o1 out of Haven.

"Your friend N^o1 will be helping out with the injured on the *Nostremius*, and we were going to go in there, masquerading as patients, and bring him out with my super-duper modified lasers, but there was always going to be the niggly problem of the little fellow perhaps getting a magical bolt off before I enthralled him. But now, Holly Short, one of his best friends in the whole world, is going to fetch him for me."

Turnball turned to Unix. "Tell the bot to spit out Captain Short."

Unix consulted a computer rendering of the bot and its contents on a wall screen. With a flick of his finger, he dragged Holly from the gel. Almost instantaneously, the bot did the same. Holly felt as though she were being vomited from the belly of a beast onto the cold metal floor. She lay there gasping as her lungs accustomed themselves to breathing pure air once more. She opened her eyes to see a grinning Turnball looming over her.

"I'm remembering more and more about you as time goes by," he said, and kicked her hard in the ribs with one black boot. "And I remember that you put me in prison. But never mind, eh. Now you can make up for it by doing me a good turn."

Holly spat a blob of gel onto the deck. "Not likely, Turnball."

Turnball kicked her again. "You will address me by my rank."

Holly spoke through gritted teeth. "I doubt it."

"I don't doubt it," said Turnball, and put his boot on her throat. From his pocket he pulled what looked like a penlight.

"This looks like a penlight, doesn't it?"

Holly could not speak, but she was guessing the slim cylinder was something more sinister than a light.

“Yet it is quite a bit more than that. You may have guessed that black-magic runes are something of a hobby of mine. Illegal, yes, but almost everything I do is illegal, so why start worrying now? What this little laser does is burn the rune directly into the skin of the person I wish to enslave. No magic necessary. So long as I have the corresponding rune on my person, then you are in my thrall forever.”

Turnball showed his thumb to Holly, the one with Vishby’s rune still inscribed on the pad, the magic of which could be transferred to her now that Vishby was dead. “And guess what, my dear? A free slot just opened up in my organization.”

Root activated the laser and hummed for a moment until the tip turned red, then he jammed it into Holly’s neck, branding her with his binding rune. Holly bucked and screamed in a black-magic fit. “Not so gentle as the touch,” noted Turnball, stepping out of puke range just in case. The fit lasted less than a minute, leaving Holly rigid on the floor, breathing abnormally fast, eyelids fluttering. Turnball licked the blood rune on his own thumb. “Now, Miss Short, what say we go and kidnap a warlock?” Holly stood, arms stiff by her side, eyes unfocused.

“Yes, Captain,” she said.

Turnball clapped her on the back. “That’s more like it, Short. Isn’t it liberating not to have a choice? You just do what I say, and nothing is your fault.”

“Yes, Captain. Most liberating.”

Turnball handed her a Neutrino. “Feel free to kill anyone who gets in your way.”

Holly checked the battery level expertly. “Anyone who gets in my way, I kill them.”

“I like these lasers,” said Turnball, twiddling the rune pen. “Let’s do someone else. Tell the bot to pop young Fowl out of his bubble, Unix. It will be nice to have a pet genius.”

Unix dragged his finger across the touch screen, and Artemis flopped gasping to the floor like a fish out of water.

The Aquanaut Nostremius, Atlantis Trench; Now

The young demon warlock who chose to call himself N^o1 was feeling extremely sad. He was a sensitive little fellow—though you would not think it to look at his gray armor-plated hide and the squat head that seemed to push its way out of his lumpy shoulders—but he felt others’ pain, and this trait, according to his master, was what made him such an excellent warlock.

There was a lot of pain in the fairy world today. The Martian probe disasters in Iceland and the Atlantis Trench were the worst fairy disasters to have occurred in recent times. To the humans, injury on this scale would probably not even make it onto the big news stations, but the fairy folk were small in number and cautious by nature, so to have two probe-related disasters in one cycle was horrific. But at least a larger catastrophe had been averted by the efficient evacuation of Atlantis. N^o1 had barely begun to grieve for the loss of his friends in Iceland, when the LEP had informed him that Holly, Foaly, and Artemis had actually survived.

Commander Trouble Kelp asked him to go to Atlantis on the *Nostremius* hospital ship to help heal those injured by the probe’s blast wave. The little demon had immediately agreed, hoping that he could distract himself for a short period at least by using his powers to help others. And now news had filtered through that Holly’s escape pod had gone down at sea, and all hands were presumed lost. It was too much to process: dead, alive, then dead again. If Holly had had some magic in her system, N^o1 might have been able to sense her out there somewhere, but he could feel nothing.

So for the past several hours N°1 had worked himself ragged, laying hands on the injured. He had knitted bones, sealed gashes, repaired ruptured organs, drawn salt water from lungs, draped veils of calm over hysteria, and, in some extreme cases, wiped the entire pileup from people's memory. For the first time since he had blossomed as a warlock, N°1 was actually feeling a little depleted. But he could not leave right now, as word had just come over the aquanaut's speakers that yet another ambulance had docked.

I need to sleep, he thought wearily. But not to dream. I would only dream of Holly. I cannot believe she's gone.

And something made him look up at that moment, and he saw Holly Short walking down the corridor toward the quarantine door. The sight was so unexpected that N°1 was strangely unsurprised.

It's Holly, but she's moving weirdly. As though she's underwater.

N°1 finished the bone knit he was working on, then left the cleanup to a nurse. He shambled toward the security door, where Holly was having her retina scanned. The computer accepted her LEP credentials and popped open with a pneumatic hiss.

N°1 skipped outside to prevent Holly entering.

"We have to keep that area germ free," he said, sorry these had to be the first words he uttered to his resurrected friend. "And you look like you just escaped from toxic garbage." Then he hugged her tightly. "You smell like a toxic dump too, but you're alive. Thank goodness. Tell me, did Foaly survive? Please say he did. And Artemis? I couldn't bear it when I heard you were all gone."

Holly did not meet his eyes. "Artemis is sick. I need you to come."

N°1 was immediately desolate, his mood swinging rapidly like a small child's. "Artemis is sick? Oh no. Bring him in and we can take care of him here."

Holly turned back the way she had come. "No. He can't be moved. You need to follow me."

N°1 jogged after his friend Holly without a moment's hesitation. "Is it a broken bone, is that it? Artemis can't be moved? Is Foaly okay? Where did you guys go?"

But there were no answers for the little demon, and all he could do was follow Holly's square shoulders through the throngs of walking wounded, past the cots that had been erected in the hallways. The smell of disinfectant burned his nostrils, and the cries of the injured seared his heart.

I'll just fix Artemis quickly. Maybe lie down for a minute, then get back to work.

N°1 was a good soul, and it never for a moment occurred to him to probe Holly a little to make sure she was fully herself. It never crossed his mind that one of his closest friends could be leading him into a life of servitude.

Turnball sat by Leonor's bed in the stolen shuttle ambulance, holding her hand while she slept. He felt a little giddy about changing his plan at the last minute. It was quite the cavalier move, and the rush of adrenaline reminded him of his younger days.

"It was all seat-of-the-pants stuff before I went to prison," he confided to the sleeping Leonor. "I was a captain in the LEP and running the underworld at the same time. To be honest, there wasn't much of an underworld before I came along. In the morning I would chair a meeting of the task force that was trying to apprehend me, and in the evening I would be doing black-market deals with the goblin gangs." Turnball smiled and shook his head. "Good days."

Leonor did not react, as Turnball had thought it best to give her just a drop of sedative until the warlock had restored her youth. He knew from her talk of death that he was losing his grip on his wife, and she was not strong enough to survive another thrall rune.

So sleep, my darling. Sleep. Soon, all will be as it was.

As soon as Captain Short returned with the demon. And if she did not? Then he would board the *Nostremius* and take the warlock by force. Perhaps he would lose a crew member or two, but they should be glad to die for their captain's wife.

One level down, in the brig, Bobb Ragby was on guard duty, a duty that he was enjoying immensely, as he considered it payback for all the years he himself had been lorded over by guards. It didn't matter to Bobb that his gel-bound prisoners weren't actually the people who'd watched over him: that was just their bad luck. He was taking special pleasure in teasing Mulch Diggums, whom he had long considered a competitor in the *top criminal dwarf* competition that he'd played in his head during the long hours spent on the toilet, thanks to a diet of processed food.

Turnball had ordered him to split the amorphobots for safety, and now one hung in each corner of the cell like a giant wobbling egg sac.

If any of them act up, then use the shocker feature at your own discretion, Turnball had said. And if they try to shoot their way out, make sure we get that on video so we can have a good laugh later.

Ragby had decided he would definitely use the shocker at the first provocation, maybe *before* the first provocation.

"Hey, Diggums, why don't you try to eat some of the gel so I have an excuse to electrocute you?"

Mulch did not waste his energy talking: he simply bared his enormous teeth.

"Yeah?" said Ragby. "They ain't so big. The more I look at you, Diggums, the less I believe all that junk your little groupies spew back at The Sozzled Parrot. You don't look like much of a burglar to me, Diggums. I think you're a phoney. A fraud, a tale-spinning liar."

Mulch brought a hand up to his face. *Yawn.*

Artemis had been returned to the grip of his amorphobot once the branding had been completed, and with nothing to do but think in its clammy folds, he could feel whatever was left of his battered personality slipping away. The rune on his neck had taken hold of his willpower in a vicelike grip, and while he could think and speak at the moment, it took a lot of effort, and he guessed that he only had those rudimentary functions because Turnball hadn't given him any specific instructions yet. Once he had his orders, then he would be powerless to resist.

Turnball will be able to order me to do anything, he realized.

Through the distorting field of gel, Artemis could see Ragby taunting Mulch, and thought that perhaps it would be a good idea if he joined the argument.

Speaking through the gel was a tricky affair that involved forming the words through clenched teeth, which kept the gel out but allowed it to pick up vibration in the throat.

"Hello, Mr. Ragby," he said. The amorphobot sprouted a gel speaker and translated the vibrations into words.

"Hey, look," said Ragby. "The thrall speaks. What do you want, Mud Boy? A little shock, is that what you want?"

Artemis decided that highbrow intellectual argument was not the way to go with this person, and chose to go straight for the personal insult.

"I want you to have a bath, dwarf. You stink."

Ragby was delighted to have a little diversion. "Wow. That's like actual grown-up fighting talk. You do know that your bodyguard is out of action?"

If Butler had been equipped with laser eyeballs, Bobb Ragby would have had holes bored right through his skull.

What are you up to, Artemis? wondered Butler. This kind of insult is not your style.

“I don’t need a bodyguard to dispose of you, Ragby,” continued Artemis. “Just a bucket of water and a wire brush.”

“Funny,” said Ragby, though he sounded a little less amused than previously.

“Perhaps some disinfectant, so your germs would not spread.”

“I have a fungus,” said Ragby. “It’s a real medical condition and it’s very hurtful of you to bring it up.”

“Awww,” said Artemis. “Is the big tough dwarf in pain?”

Ragby had had enough. “Not as much pain as you,” he said, and instructed the bot to pass a charge through its gel sac.

Artemis was attacked by shards of white lightning. He jittered for a moment like a marionette in the hands of a toddler, then relaxed, floating unconscious in the gel.

Ragby laughed. “Not so funny now, are you?”

Butler growled, which would have been menacing had not his bot speakers translated it as a robotic purr, then he began to push. It should have been impossible for him to make any impact without traction, but somehow he actually managed to distend the gel, causing the bot to chitter as though being tickled.

“You guys are hilarious,” said Ragby, and allowed Butler to wear himself out for a few minutes before he grew bored and shocked the bodyguard. Not enough to knock the big human out, but certainly enough to calm him down a little.

“Two down,” he said cheerily. “Who’s next?”

“Me,” said Mulch. “I’m next.”

Bobb Ragby turned to find Mulch Diggums rolled into a ball, rear end pointed directly at Bobb himself. The rear end was not covered by material, or, in other words, it was a bare bottom and it meant business.

Ragby, as a dwarf himself and a subscriber to *Where the Wind Blows* monthly, knew exactly what was about to happen.

“No way,” he breathed. He should shock Diggums, he knew, but this was too much entertainment to pass up. If things got out of hand, he could press the button; until then no harm in watching. Just in time, he remembered to press record on the security cameras, in case the captain wanted a look later.

“Go on, Diggums. If you actually break free, then I’ll present my own backside for a good kicking.”

Mulch did not reply: breathing was too difficult inside the gel to go wasting any precious energy trading insults with Bobb Ragby. Instead he wrapped his forearms around his shins and bore down on his colon, which was inflated like a very long balloon snake.

“Go, Mulch!” whooped Ragby. “Make your people proud. Just so you know, this will be up on the Ethernet in about five minutes.”

The first bubble to emerge was cantaloupe sized. These big bubbles were known among dwarf tunnelers as *corkers*, from back in the days when corks were used to cap bottles. Often a corker had to be cleared before the main flow could begin.

“Good-sized corker,” Bobb Ragby admitted.

Once the corker was out of his system, Mulch followed it with a flurry of smaller squibs, which

emerged into the gel with an initial speed that was quickly arrested by the bot's gel.

"Is that it?" called Bobb, a little disappointed, truth be known. "Is that all you got?"

That was not all Mulch had got. A hundred more assorted squibs quickly followed, some spheres, some ellipsoids, and Ragby swore he saw a cube.

"Now you're just showing off!" he said.

The bubbles just kept on coming in various sizes and shapes. Some were transparent, some suspiciously opaque, and a few had wisps of gas inside that crackled when they hit the gel.

The bot chattered nervously, the metal hardware heart flashing orange as its built-in spectrometer struggled to analyze the gas's components.

"Now *that* I have never seen," said Bobb, his finger hovering over the shocker button.

Still the bubbles flowed, inflating the amorphobot to twice its original size. Its chitterings climbed the octaves until eventually they shattered nearby medical beakers and climbed to ultrasonic wavelengths, too high for the humans and fairies to hear.

The shrieking has stopped, thought Bobb. That must mean the danger is past.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Mulch was virtually invisible now behind the bubbles, his image twisted and refracted by their curved surfaces. More and more bubbles were produced. Mulch seemed to be the dwarf equivalent of a clown's car that could hold more passengers than would seem to be allowed by the laws of physics. The amorphobot was stretched to its limits, and its surface was dappled by the pressure. It began bouncing on the spot, venting bursts of the mysterious smoky gas.

"Well, Mulch, it's been fun," said Bobb Ragby, and reluctantly pressed the shocker button, which, as it turned out, was the wrong thing to do. Even the amorphobot tried to refuse the order, but Ragby insisted, jabbing the button again and again until the familiar crackling sparked from two nodes on its metallic heart. Any first-day chemistry student could have told Ragby never to put sparks near a mystery gas.

Unfortunately, Ragby had never met any first-day chemistry students, and so it came as a total surprise to him when the gas passed by Mulch Diggums ignited, bubble after bubble, in a chain reaction of mini explosions.

The bot expanded and ruptured, gel jets erupting from its surface. It bounced from floor to ceiling then pinballed across the cell, running Ragby over like a giant tire. It was a testament to Foaly's design and standards that the amorphobot held its integrity even under such extreme circumstances. It transferred gel from unscorched sections and grafted them onto ruined areas.

Ragby lay stunned on the deck while the bot came to rest across the hatch, shuddering and heaving. In cases like this, it had a deep-rooted self-preservation order that Turnball had not thought to override. In the event that a sample collected by one of the amorphobots proved dangerous to the bot's systems, then that subject was to be immediately ejected. And this pungent dwarf was definitely dangerous, and so the damaged amorphobot hawked Mulch Diggums onto the blackened deck, where he lay, smoking.

"I should never have had all that vole curry," he mumbled, then passed out.

Bobb Ragby was the first dwarf to recover.

"That was something," he said, then spat out a lump of charred gel. "You got out, darn it if you didn't, so I suppose by rights I should present my behind for a kicking."

Ragby lowered his wide bottom toward Mulch's unconscious face, but got no reaction.

"No takers?" he said. "Well, you can't say I didn't offer."

“Here,” said a voice behind him. “Let me kick that for you.”

He twisted his neck around just in time to see an enormous boot heading for his behind, and behind that boot there was an angry head, which, in spite of being a little out of focus because of Bobb’s perspective, unmistakably belonged to the human Butler.

Mulch had never believed he would actually get out of the amorphobot’s belly, but he had hoped to distract Bobb Ragby for a few moments so that Foaly could come up with one of his genius techy plans.

And that was exactly what had happened. While Ragby had been occupied watching the gastrobatics of his fellow dwarf, Foaly had been busy syncing the bot core Artemis had picked up at the impact site with the core in his own amorphobot. In a laboratory it would have taken him about ten seconds to connect and send a string of code to shut out the instructions from the stolen control orb, but, suspended inside an amorphobot, it took the centaur at least half a minute. As soon as the readout flashed green, Foaly networked with the remaining bots and instructed them to dissolve.

Half a second later, Juliet and Foaly flopped to the floor, tears in their eyes, gel in their windpipes. Artemis lay unmoving, still unconscious from his electrocution.

Butler landed on his feet, spat and attacked.

* * *

Poor Bobb Ragby never had a chance, not that Butler did much to him. All it took was one kick, then the dwarf’s terror took hold and jetted him straight into the lip of a metal bunk. He collapsed with a surprisingly childlike moan.

Butler turned quickly to Artemis and checked his pulse.

“How’s Artemis’s heart?” asked Juliet, bending to check on Mulch.

“It’s beating,” replied her brother. “That’s about all I can tell you. We need to get him over to that hospital ship. Mulch too.” The dwarf coughed then muttered something about beer and cheese pies.

“Do you mean beer, and cheese pies? Or beer-and-cheese pies?” Juliet glanced at her brother. “Mulch may be delirious—it’s hard to tell.”

Butler took Bobb Ragby’s gun from his belt, then tossed him bodily onto Foaly’s broad back.

“Okay. Here’s the strategy. We take Artemis and Mulch across to the *Nostremius*’s sick bay, then I retrieve Holly if necessary.”

Juliet’s head snapped back. “But Foaly can do—”

“Get moving,” thundered Butler. “Go immediately. I do not want to talk about it.”

“Okay. But if you’re not with us in five minutes, I’m coming after you.”

“I would appreciate that,” said Butler, propping Mulch on Foaly’s back, then the unconscious Artemis. “And if you could bring any troops you find along the way, that would be great.”

“Troops on a hospital ship?” said Foaly, trying his best not to smell what was on his back. “You’ll be lucky.”

Mulch’s tongue lolled out, resting on the centaur’s neck. “Mmm,” he mumbled around his tongue. “Horse. Tasty.”

“Let’s go,” said Foaly nervously. “Let’s go right now.”

The ambulance was a small ship compared to the massive aquanaut that loomed over them. The little

craft had two levels: a sick bay and cell downstairs and on top of the spiral staircase a bridge with a small trucker's cabin, and apart from a couple of nooks for storage and recycling, and the room in which they'd been imprisoned, that was it. Luckily for Butler and the others, the umbilical across to the *Nostremius* was on the bottom level.

Ching Mayle was peering across through the umbilical, obviously waiting for Holly's return with the demon warlock.

"Please," whispered Juliet, when they saw the goblin at the hatch, "allow me."

Butler was holding both Artemis and Mulch steady on Foaly's back; Bobb Ragby he was not so worried about. "Knock yourself out," he said. "Or, rather, knock the other guy out."

Being a wrestler, Juliet could not simply run at Ching Mayle and knock him out—she had to add a little drama.

She ran down the corridor crying hysterically, "Help me, Mr. Goblin. Save me."

Ching removed his fingers from the bite marks on his skull he was forever scratching, which of course meant that they never healed properly.

"Uh . . . save you from what?"

Juliet sniffled. "There's a big ugly goblin trying to stop us from leaving the ship."

Mayle reached for his gun. "There's a what?"

"A big ugly guy, with all these septic dents in his head."

Ching licked his eyeballs. "Septic dents? Hey, wait a minute. . . ."

"Finally," said Juliet, and pirouetted like an ice skater, whacking Ching Mayle with her signature jade ring. He tumbled into the umbilical passage, sliding down to the low point. Juliet caught his weapon before it hit the deck.

"One more down," she said.

"You couldn't just punch him in the head," grumbled Butler, leading Foaly past her. "*Boo-hoo. Help me, I'm a girl.* What kind of modern woman are you?"

"A smart one," said Juliet. "He never even got a shot off."

Butler was not impressed. "He should never have got a hand to his gun. Next time, just hit the goblin. You're lucky he didn't blast you with a fireball."

"Oh no," said Foaly, pushing through a rope curtain that seemed to be coated with disinfectant, and into the umbilical passage. "No flame near the umbilical. This is a pressurized tube with an oxygen-helium mix, heavy on the oxygen because of the pressure. One spark in here and first we explode, then the tube ruptures and the ocean squashes us flat."

One by one they stepped into the umbilical. It was an incredible construction. A double-skinned tube of transparent super-tough plastic, strengthened with a wrap of octagonal wire mesh. Air pumps hummed loudly along its length, and light orbs drew deep-sea creatures to it, including Artemis's giant squid, which had wrapped itself around the umbilical's central span and was gnawing the wire frame with its beak. Its chitin-lined suckers scraped the plastic, smearing long welts along the tube.

"Don't worry," said Foaly confidently. "That creature can't get through. We've done a thousand stress tests."

"With actual giant squid?" asked Juliet, understandably concerned.

"No," admitted Foaly.

"So just computer tests, then?"

"Absolutely not," said Foaly, offended. "We used a normal squid and a tiny umbilical model. It worked quite well until one of my dwarf lab assistants fancied some calamari."

Juliet shuddered. "It's just that I have a thing about giant squid."

"Don't we all?" said Foaly, and clopped past her down the umbilical.

The passage was fifty yards long with a slight incline at either end. The walkway beneath their feet was coated with a slightly tacky substance to prevent any accidental sparking, and there were fire-extinguishing scatter bombs at regular intervals that would automatically coat the tube with powder in the event of a fire breaking out.

Foaly pointed at one of the fire-extinguishing bombs. "In all honesty, those are for show. If so much as a spark gets loose in here, not even the squid is going to survive."

They proceeded across to the aquanaut, feeling the cold of the ocean radiate through the walls, breathing the sharp oxygen-rich air. The *Nostremius* hospital ship loomed above, four stories high, curved green walls dotted by a thousand glowing portholes, anchored to the seabed by a dozen bus-sized anchors. Umbilicals stretched from several ports, and shadowy figures could be seen shuffling across from their ships to the *Nostremius*. It was a somber, surreal image.

Foaly led, carrying Artemis, Mulch, and a snoring Bobb Ragby, complaining every step of the way.

"Passengers. Centaurs don't carry passengers. Just because we have a horse's torso doesn't mean we have a horse's temperament. This is demeaning, that's what it is."

Neither Juliet nor Butler took any notice. They were in a dangerous stretch right now, and any confrontation had to be quickly contained or it could mean a watery grave for them all.

On Foaly's back, Artemis moaned and stirred. Butler patted his shoulder.

"You just stay asleep, young man. No need to wake up now."

As much respect as Butler had for Artemis's abilities, he couldn't think how they could help in this situation, especially with that angry-looking rune burned into his neck.

They were two-thirds of the way across when the hatch on the *Nostremius* slid open, and Holly stepped through, followed by N^o1.

There was no emotion in Holly's eyes, but she calmly assessed the situation and drew the Neutrino from her holster, taking a quick bead on Butler's forehead. From the look on her face, she could have been about to shoot a dart at a fairground target.

"No, Captain Short," said Turnball's voice from behind Butler. "No guns in here."

Turnball stood at the entrance to the ambulance with Unix, as ever, at one shoulder, and Ark Sool hovering at the other.

Juliet was on rear-guard duty. "It's the jolly pirate," she called to her brother. "And his merry idiots. I think that without guns we're in pretty good shape. Should I go over there and beat some respect for life into them?"

Butler held up two fingers. *Wait.*

This was a nightmare scenario for any bodyguard: stuck in the middle of a transparent tube, several miles underwater, with a murdering band of fugitives at one end and an enthralled but still highly skilled police officer at the other.

Poor N^o1 had no idea what kind of drama he had stepped into.

"Holly, what's going on? Are we in the middle of one of your big adventures? Should I zap someone?"

Holly stood impassively waiting for instructions, but Butler heard what N^o1 had said. "No magic, N^o1. One spark could blow up this entire platform."

N^o1 sighed. "Can't you people ever just go on a picnic or something? Do there always have to be

explosions?”

Artemis moaned again, then slid from behind Mulch off Foaly’s back onto the walkway.

Standing in the doorway of the stolen shuttle ambulance, gazing down the umbilical toward Butler, Turnball realized he had a few marked cards in the deck. “Ah,” he said. “My little genius awakes. This should make our game interesting.”

Butler turned sideways to make himself a smaller target. There were to be no guns in this showdown, but there could be blades. “Go back inside,” he called to N^o1. “Go in and shut the hatch.”

The demon warlock tapped Holly’s shoulder. “Should I go in, Holly? Would that be the best thing to do?”

Holly did not answer, but with that touch, N^o1 felt the rune spell that squatted like a parasite on her mind. It seemed purple to him, and malignant, and somehow aware. In his imagination, the reptilian rune crouching on Holly’s brain snarled at him and nipped with venomous teeth.

“Oh,” said N^o1, withdrawing his finger sharply.

I could undo the spell, he thought. But it would be delicate work to avoid brain damage, and there would definitely be sparks.

He took a slow step backward, but Holly quickly walked around him and smashed the heel of her hand into the door mechanism, sealing it for as long as it took for maintenance to get a fairy down there. Which would be way too long.

“No running away, young Master Demon,” called Turnball. “I have need of your magic.”

My magic, thought N^o1. There must be something I can do. The *mesmer* doesn’t require any sparks.

“Listen to me, Holly,” said the demon warlock, his voice multilayered with magic. “Look into my eyes.”

Which was as far as he got before Holly brought the edge of her hand down in a chopping motion that hit N^o1 accurately in the gap between the armor plates on his chest and neck. Right in the windpipe. The demon collapsed to the ground, gasping. It would be minutes before he could do as much as squeak.

Turnball laughed cruelly. “Rune trumps *mesmer*, would say.”

Butler tried to ignore the more extreme circumstances, such as the explosive gas they were breathing and the giant squid giving him the evil eye from outside the umbilical tube, and treat the situation as a common alley brawl.

I have been in this situation a dozen times. Admittedly, we are flanked, but Juliet and I could take these and a dozen more. Holly can fight, but she is mesmerized, and that will slow her down. Why is Turnball so confident with only a gnome and a sprite by his side?

“Ready, sister?” he said.

“Say the word.”

“I’ll take Turnball and his friends. You contain Holly without doing any damage if you can manage it.”

“Okay, brother.”

“What should I do?” asked Foaly, trying to keep the whinny out of his voice.

“Stand over Artemis and Mulch. Keep them safe.”

“Very well, Butler,” said the centaur, feeling utterly helpless, as he always did in violent situations. “You can count on me.”

Butler and Juliet switched sides, touching hands briefly on the way past.

“Be careful. Holly is quick.”

“You too. I don’t trust that Turnball guy.”

Both of these statements would shortly prove themselves true. Unfortunately, Butler had formulated their plan of action without two vital pieces of information. First of all, Holly was not *mesmerized*, she was enthralled by a rune, and where the *mesmer* slowed the enchanted person down, runes certainly did not. In fact, they gave the victim access to more life force than they would normally have, which is why long-term thralls must not be allowed to get too excited for too long or they will literally burn themselves out. The second piece of information Butler did not have was the fact that Turnball had anticipated he might have to fight his way through an umbilical, and so was armed accordingly.

The Butlers went down within seconds of each other. Juliet ran full tilt for Holly, no chatter or exaggerated wrestling moves—Holly was a serious opponent. The serious opponent stood listlessly, arms dangling until the last possible moment, then she ducked low, so quickly that it seemed a ghost image hung in the space where she had been, and swept Juliet’s legs from under her. Juliet banged her head hard on the walkway, and by the time her vision cleared, Holly was on her chest with her Neutrino leveled at Juliet’s head.

“No sparks,” panted Juliet. “No sparks.”

“No sparks,” repeated Holly dully, then stuffed the gun barrel down the front of Juliet’s Jade Princess leotard and pulled the trigger. Juliet spasmed once, then collapsed. There were no sparks.

At the other end of the conduit, Butler had not rushed forward with quite so much gusto. If things were as they seemed, he could easily defeat Turnball and his little henchfairies. Perhaps a menacing approach would be enough to scare them into running away.

Turnball seemed a little irritated and not at all scared. “Mr. Butler, as a manservant to a great strategist, didn’t it occur to you that another great strategist such as myself might have anticipated this moment, or one like it?”

Butler’s stomach sank. *Turnball is armed.*

Butler’s only option was to cover the remaining distance before Turnball managed to aim his weapon. He almost made it, but then *almost* in a fight is about as useful as rubber needles in a knitting contest.

Turnball unclipped the stumpy weapon on a lanyard behind his back and shot Butler eight times in the chest and head. The bodyguard’s eyes rolled back in his head, but his momentum drove him forward, and Turnball had to skip smartly to one side to avoid being crushed. Ark Sool and Unix were not so lucky. Butler landed on them like a meteor, driving every last gasp of air from their bodies and breaking several ribs.

“Olé!” said Turnball, who had made a point of attending the bullfights whenever he was in Spain, not seeming too upset by the loss of his crew.

The vibrations set off one of the fire-extinguisher powder packs, which must have been on a hair trigger, and filled the umbilical with floating white powder.

“Oh, the weather outside is frightful,” sang Turnball, pointing his gun at Foaly, who was trying to at least look brave. “Do you like my weapon? It was developed for crowd control during the first goblin riots. Purely chemical. Shoots Zolpidem tartrate knockout pellets. Gas powered, with dissolvable shells. No sparks. Sometimes low-tech is the way to go.”

Artemis suddenly drew a lungful of air, as though he had just breached the ocean’s surface.

“Ah, my genius surfaces. Stand up, Artemis. I command you.”

Artemis lurched to his feet, his head and clothes matted with white powder.

“Choke that centaur for me, would you?”

There followed an uncomfortable minute while Artemis tried to find some purchase on Foaly’s broad neck, then squeezed with all the power in his fingers, which was not very much. Foaly was more embarrassed than hurt.

Turnball wiped a tear from his eye. “Oh, this is too much. But I indulge myself—Leonor is waiting. Come here, Artemis, and you too, Captain Short. Bring the demon. We must be gone from here before the ambulance generator blows.”

Artemis and Holly did as they were told with the emotion of automatons. Holly yanked poor, gasping N^o1 along by the collar of his tunic, and Artemis stepped past Foaly without a glance. Outside the conduit, the fish and squid paid close attention to this fascinating diversion from the dreariness of everyday subaquatic life.

Suddenly, Turnball was impatient to be off.

“Come now, my thralls. Where is the speed you are famous for?”

Artemis did speed up, showing a nimbleness that anyone who knew the boy would not associate with him.

“That’s more like it,” said Turnball. “I may keep you, Artemis.”

“That’s nice,” said the human boy. “I’ll tell him when I see him.”

“Ehm,” said Turnball, puzzled; then the boy who looked like Artemis Fowl jabbed Turnball in the gut with stiffened fingers.

“Butler showed Artemis that one a thousand times,” said the boy. “He didn’t listen, but I did.”

Turnball wanted to say something, but he was winded, and even if he hadn’t been, he had no idea what he would have said.

“For I am not Artemis Fowl, villainous elf,” said Orion, twisting the gun from Turnball’s fingers. “I am the young romantic who always knew his day would come, so I listened to Butler and I am ready.”

Turnball got enough breath back for one word. “How?”

“Artemis knew he had to escape the power of the rune, which controlled his mind but not mine, so he goaded your cretinous minion into shocking him, which released me.”

Turnball clasped his stomach. *Of course. Atlantis stage two.* He rested both elbows on his knees and rasped at Holly. “Kill him. Kill the boy.”

Orion pivoted and aimed the gun at Holly. “Please, sweet maiden. Do not force my hand, for I will strike for the good of all.”

Holly threw N^o1 aside and ran full tilt, side to side.

“Artemis could never shoot,” she snarled.

Orion squared his shoulders and extended his hands, supporting his right hand with his left. Both Artemis and Orion were ambidextrous, but, unlike Artemis, Orion favored his right hand. He remembered what Butler had said time and time again: *Sight along your arm. Breathe out and squeeze.*

The first pellet caught Holly on the cheek, the second on the forehead, and the third on the shoulder, which took a second to penetrate. Holly’s speed took her halfway up the curved wall before her body gave out, and she slid back down on her face.

Orion turned to Turnball, who was sneaking up on him.

“Be still, foul demon.”

“Hey,” said N^o1, who was getting his breath back.

“Apologies, gentle mage,” said Orion. “I was referring to my piratical foe.”

“Four,” said Turnball, with some desperation. “Four four four.”

Orion laughed a haughty hero’s laugh. “No such luck, Turnball Root. Your evil plans have been thwarted. Accept your fate.”

Turnball’s face turned slowly purple, a family trait.

“I need the demon,” he bellowed, spittle spraying from his lips. “Turn him over, or we all die.”

“Too late for hollow threats, my friend. You have been outfoxed. Now, sit still while my compadre, the noble steed, binds your hands.”

Turnball took a whooping breath and stood erect. “No. I have one card left to play. The ambulance is rigged to explode. The autopilot is smashed and the generator has been exposed—there is no turning back. Give me the demon and I will pilot the shuttle deep into the trench, then escape in the belly of an amorphobot. There is room for one more besides Leonor. I can take you instead of N^o1.”

Foaly sucked his lips. “Ah. Okay. Little problem with that plan. I dissolved the bots.”

“So that was your plot,” said Orion fiercely, brandishing the gun like a cutlass. “You would take what you wanted and then bury the evidence in the explosion.”

Turnball shrugged, suddenly calm. He had always known a day like this would come. “It has worked for me before.” He consulted a timer on his wrist computer. “In five minutes the shuttle explodes and we all die. If you will excuse me, I must go to my wife’s bedside.”

He turned to find his wife a little closer than expected. Leonor stood framed by the umbilical’s curtain, leaning heavily on her walking stick, face pale in the glow from the light orbs.

“Turnball, what’s happening?” she said, her breath labored, but both eyes were open and they were clear. Clearer than they had been since they’d first met.

Turnball rushed to her side, supporting her with one arm.

“Yes, my dear. You should lie down. Things will be better soon.”

Leonor snapped as she had not for a long time. “You just said the ship will explode.”

Turnball’s eyes were wide with surprise—his beloved wife had never snapped at him before—but he kept a gentle smile on his lips. “What does it matter, so long as we are together? Even death will not separate us.”

From somewhere, Leonor found the strength to stand straight. “I am ready for my long sleep, Turnball. But you are young, these people are young, and is that not a hospital ship we are moored to?”

“Yes, yes it is. But these people are my enemies. They have persecuted me.” Turnball licked the rune on his thumb, but Leonor was beyond his power now.

“I think that perhaps you were far from blameless, my dear, but I was blinded by love. I have always loved you, Turnball. I always will.”

Orion was getting anxious. The seconds were ticking away, and he had no wish to see his beloved Holly at the heart of an explosion.

“Step aside, madam,” he said to Leonor. “I must pilot this ship deep into the trench.”

Leonor raised her stick shakily. “No. I will take this journey alone. I have outstayed my welcome on this earth, and shut my eyes to what was happening around me. Now at last I will fly where I never thought possible.” She stroked Turnball’s wet cheek and kissed him. “At last I can finally fly again, Turnball.”

Turnball clasped his wife’s shoulders tenderly. “You can fly, you will. But not now. This flight is

death, and I cannot be without you. Don't you want what we had?"

"Those times are gone," said Leonor simply. "Perhaps they should never have been. Now, you must let me go, or else you must try to stop me."

This was an ultimatum that Turnball had been dreading since first applying the rune to Leonor's neck. He was about to lose his wife, and there was nothing he could do about it. His emotions played across his face, and a network of lines appeared around his eyes as though drawn by an invisible pen.

"I must go, Turnball," said Leonor softly.

"Fly, my love," said Turnball, and he seemed in that moment as old as his wife.

"Let me do this for you, my love. Let me save you, as you saved me all those years ago." Leonor kissed him again and withdrew through the curtain.

Turnball stood for a moment, shoulders shuddering, chin down, then he pulled himself together.

He faced Orion and jerked a thumb toward the ambulance. "I should go. Leonor will never make it back up the steps on her own."

And with such an ordinary statement, he was gone, the hatch sealing behind him.

"Understated but graceful," said Orion. "A nice exit."

The Butlers were both unconscious, which would be a source of some ribbing and embarrassment later, so they did not see the stolen ambulance shuttle detach itself from the umbilical conduit and peel away from the *Nostremius*, Leonor and Turnball clearly visible at the cockpit controls. And they completely missed the shuttle diving deep into the Atlantis Trench in a long graceful arc.

"That woman is quite a pilot," said Orion. "I imagine they are holding hands now and smiling bravely."

Moments later a hellfire blossom grew from the depths of the trench, but the explosion was quickly extinguished by the millions of tons of water bearing down on it. The shock currents, however, raced along the raised ridge, dislodging centuries-old coral and rippling the untethered end of the umbilical conduit like a child would a skipping rope, sending the squid scurrying for safety.

The tube's occupants were jumbled together, heroes and villains alike, and swept to the *Nostremius*'s door, which moments later was opened from the inside by a confused technical officer, a hardened sea gnome, who, to his eternal shame, squealed like a baby sprite when he came face-to-face with a gigantic human covered in white dust.

"Zombie!" he shrieked, and, unfortunately for him, two of his shift buddies were in the air lock behind him, and it cost him three weeks' pudding rations to buy their silence.

ARTEMIS woke to find Holly and Foaly leaning over him. Holly seemed concerned, whereas Foaly was scrutinizing him, as one would a lab experiment.

I am not in pain, thought Artemis. They must have given me something.

And then: I should lighten the mood.

“Ah, my princess. Noble steed. How does the morning find you both?”

“D’Arvit,” said Holly. “It’s the knight in shining armor.”

“Hmm,” said Foaly. “That’s how Atlantis goes. As it progresses, you can never predict what will set it off. I thought the cocktail of drugs would bring back Artemis, but at least Orion will tell us what Artemis is up to.” He leaned in closer. “Orion, you noble youth. Do you happen to know the password for Artemis’s firewall?”

“Of course I do,” said Artemis. “It’s D-O-N-K-E-Y space B-O-Y.”

Foaly was halfway through writing this down when the penny dropped.

“Oh, ha-ha, Artemis. Most hilarious. I knew it was you all the time.”

Holly did not laugh. “That wasn’t funny, Artemis. Atlantis Complex is no joke.”

At the mere mention of the disease, Artemis felt the nest of malignant fours stir at the back of his head.

Not again, he thought.

“It would really help if you two swapped places,” he said, trying to sound calm and in control. “Also, could you close those two porthole blinds all the way? Or open all the way, but not in the middle like that? That makes no sense.”

Holly wanted to shake Artemis until he snapped out of it, but she had talked to Dr. Argon of the Psych Brotherhood, and he had told them to humor the human until they could get him checked into the clinic.

Opal Kobi’s old room is still free, the doctor had said brightly, and Holly suspected he was already thinking of titles for the inevitable book.

So she said, “Okay, Artemis. I’ll get the blinds.”

As Holly tapped the little sun icon beside the blind, lightening the glass, she noticed the shoals of exotic fish basking in the pod light from the *Nostremius*’s stern fins.

We are all swimming toward the light, she realized, and then wondered when she’d become so philosophical. Too much thinking is one of the things that put Artemis where he is now. We need to deal with this problem.

“Artemis,” she said, forcing a note of positivity into her voice, “Dr. Argon wondered if you had any kind of record of . . .”

“My descent into madness?” completed Artemis.

“Well, he actually said, the Complex’s progression. He said keeping a journal of some kind is common among sufferers. They feel a great need to be understood after . . .”

Again Artemis completed the sentence. “After we die. I know. I feel that compulsion still.” He tugged off the ring from his middle finger. “It’s my fairy communicator, remember? I kept a video diary. Should make terrifying viewing.”

Foaly took the ring. “Let me zap that down to Argon. It will give him a little insight before he gets

you strapped into the crazy chair.” The centaur realized what he had said. “Sorry. Cabelline is always saying how insensitive I am. There’s no crazy chair, it’s more like a couch or a futon.”

“We get it, Foaly,” said Holly. “Thanks so much.”

The centaur clopped to the hospital room’s automatic door. “Okay. I’ll send this off. See you later, and watch out for those evil fours.”

Artemis winced. Holly was right: the Atlantis Complex was not funny.

Holly sat on the chair beside his bed. It was a very high-tech bed with stabilizers and impact cushions, but unfortunately a little short.

“You’re growing, Artemis,” she said.

Artemis smiled weakly. “I know. Not fast enough in some ways.”

Holly took his hand. “You can try to upset yourself if you want, but you won’t be able to. Foaly pumped enough sedative into you to put a horse to sleep.”

They both smiled at that for a moment, but Artemis was in a melancholy mood.

“This adventure was different, Holly. Usually someone wins, and we are better off at the end. But this time so many people died—innocents—and no one has benefited. And all for love. I can’t even think of Turnball as a villain—all he wanted was his wife back.”

Holly squeezed Artemis’s fingers. “Things would have been a lot worse without us around. N^o1 is alive, thanks to you, not to mention everyone on this hospital ship. And as soon as we have you back to your old self, we can get working on saving the world with your Ice Cube.”

“Good. That’s still my priority, though I might want to renegotiate my terms a little.”

“Hmm. I thought you might.”

Artemis took a sip of water from a cup on his locker. “I don’t want to go back to being me completely. My old self is what brought on Atlantis Complex in the first place.”

“You did some bad things, Artemis. But you wouldn’t do them again. Let them go.”

“Really? You can just let things go?”

“It’s not that easy, but you can do it with our help, if it’s what you really want.”

Artemis rolled his eyes. “Potions and therapy, heaven help me.”

“Dr. Argon is a bit of a fame hound, but he’s good. The best. Also, I’m sure N^o1 can give you a magical detox, get the last of those sparks out of your system.”

“That sounds painful.”

“Maybe. But you’ll have friends around you. Good friends.”

Artemis sat up on the pillows. “I know. Where’s Mulch?”

“Where do you think?”

“I think he’s in the galley. Possibly inside one of the refrigerators.”

“I think you’re probably right.”

“How about Juliet?”

Holly’s sigh was both affectionate and frustrated. “She’s organized a wrestling match between herself and a jumbo pixie who passed a comment about her ponytail. I am currently pretending I don’t know anything about it. I should go and break it up soon.”

“I pity the pixie,” said Artemis. “And how about Butler? Do you think he can ever trust me again?”

“I think he already does.”

“I need to speak to him.”

Holly glanced toward the corridor. “You’d better give it a minute. He’s making a delicate phone

call.”

Artemis could guess who he was calling. He would have to make a similar call himself soon.

“So,” he said, trying to sound more lighthearted than he actually felt, with the Atlantis Complex bubbling at the base of his temporal lobe.

Arrange this, it said.

Count that.

Beware four. Four is death.

“I hear that you were on a date with Trouble Kelp. Are you two planning on building a bivouac any time soon?”

Butler thought he might be developing claustrophobia. It definitely seemed as though the walls were closing in. It didn’t help that the corridor he was crouched in was built for people half his size. The only place he could stand up properly was the gymnasium, and that wasn’t really the place to make a private call, as his baby sister was probably beating the stuffing out of a jumbo pixie in there at the moment, playing it up for the assembled crowd of patients and medics, who would soon adore the Jade Princess.

Butler slid down the wall into a sitting position and held out Artemis’s phone.

Maybe there’s no network, he thought hopefully.

But there was. Four bars. Artemis had built his phone to access all available networks, including military and fairy. A person would have to be on the moon before Artemis’s phone would fail.

Okay. Stop putting it off. Make the call.

Butler scrolled through the contacts and selected Angeline Fowl’s mobile phone. It took a few seconds to connect, as the call had to go through Haven up to a satellite and back to Ireland, and when it did ring, the tone was the fairy triple beep.

Maybe she’s asleep.

But Angeline picked up on the second ring.

“Artemis? Where are you? Why haven’t you called?”

“No, Mrs. Fowl. It’s Butler.”

Angeline realized that Butler was calling her on Artemis’s phone and naturally jumped to the worst possible conclusion. “Oh my God! He’s dead, isn’t he? I should never have let him go.”

“No, no. Artemis is fine,” said Butler hurriedly. “Not a mark on him.”

Angeline was crying into the phone. “Thank goodness. I would blame myself. A fifteen-year-old, off to save the world, with *fairies*. What was I thinking? That’s it now. Finished. A normal life from now on.”

I can’t even remember normal, thought Butler.

“Can I speak to him?”

Here we go.

“Not at the moment. He’s . . . eh . . . sedated.”

“Sedated! You said he wasn’t hurt, Butler. You just said there wasn’t a mark on him.”

Butler winced. “There isn’t a mark on him. Not on the outside.”

Butler swore he could hear Angeline Fowl fuming. “What is that supposed to mean? Are you turning metaphorical in your dotage, man? Is Artemis hurt or not?”

Butler would have much preferred to be facing down a SWAT team than delivering this news, so

he chose his words carefully. "Artemis has developed a condition, a mental condition. It's a little like OCD."

"Oh no," said Angeline, and for a moment Butler thought she had dropped the phone, then he heard her breathing, fast and shallow.

"It can be controled," he said. "We're taking him to a clinic right now. The best clinic the fairies have. He is in absolutely no danger."

"I want to see him."

"You will. They're sending someone for you." This wasn't actually the case, but Butler vowed that it would be, seconds after he hung up the phone. "What about the twins?"

"The nanny can sleep over. Artemis's father is in São Paolo at a summit. I'll have to tell him everything."

"No," said Butler quickly. "Don't make that decision now. Talk to Artemis first."

"W-will he know me?"

"Of course he will," Butler replied.

"Very well, Butler. I'm going to pack a bag now. Tell the fairies to call when they're ten minutes away."

"I will do."

"And, Butler?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fowl?"

"Look after my boy until I get there. Family is everything, you know that."

"I do, Mrs. Fowl. I will."

The connection was severed, and Angeline Fowl's picture disappeared from the little screen.

Family is everything, thought Butler. If you're lucky.

Mulch stuck his head around the door, beard dripping with some congealing liquid that seemed to have whole turnips trapped in it. His forehead was covered in bright blue burn gel.

"Hey, bodyguard. You better get down to the gymnasium. This jumbo pixie guy is killing your sister."

"Really?" said Butler, unconvinced.

"Really. Juliet just does not seem to be herself. She can't put two moves together. It's pathetic, really. Everyone is betting against her."

"I see," said Butler, straightening as much as he could in the cramped surroundings.

Mulch held the door. "It's going to make things really interesting when you show up to help."

Butler grinned. "I'm not coming to help. I just want to be there when she stops faking."

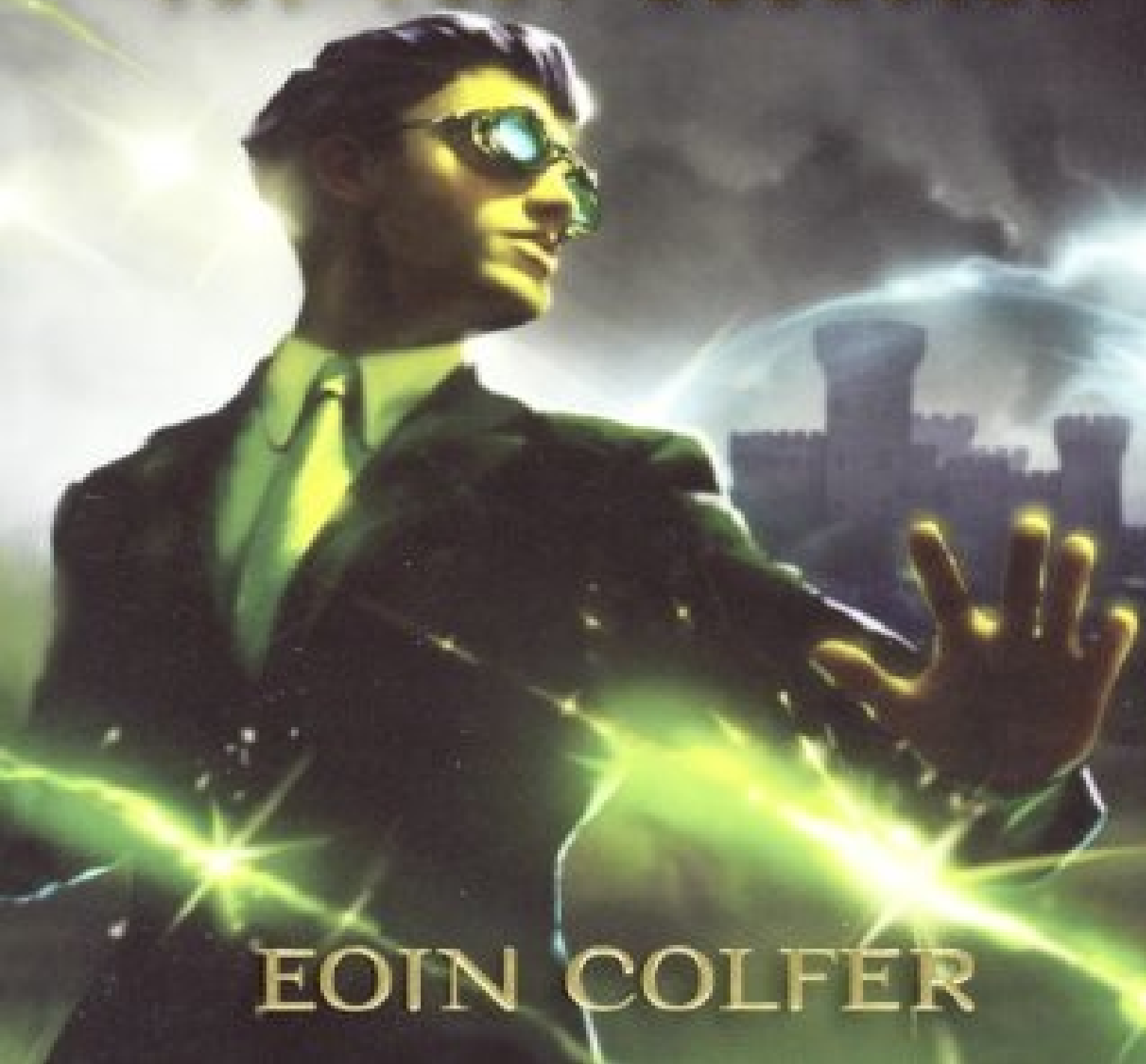
"Ah," said Mulch, comprehension dawning on his face. "So I should switch my bet to Juliet?"

"You certainly should," said Butler, and lumbered down the corridor, stepping around a pool of turnip soup.

The Final Installment in the New York Times Best-selling Series

ARTEMIS FOWL

THE LAST GUARDIAN



EOIN COLFER

ARTEMIS FOWL

THE LAST GUARDIAN

*For all the Fowl fans who journeyed to the Lower Elements with me. Thank
you.*

PROLOGUE

Ériú; Present Day

The Berserkers lay arranged in a spiral under the rune stone, looping down, down into the earth—boots out, heads in, as the spell demanded. Of course, after ten thousand years underground, there were no physical boots or heads. There was just the plasma of black magic holding their consciousness intact, and even that was dissipating, tainting the land, causing strange strains of plants to appear and infecting the animals with uncommon aggression. In perhaps a dozen full moons the Berserkers would be gone utterly, and their last spark of power would flow into the earth.

We are not all disappeared yet, thought Oro of the Danu, captain of the Berserkers. We are ready to seize our glorious moment when it comes and to sow chaos among the humans.

He sent the thought into the spiral and was proud to feel his remaining fairy warriors echo the sentiment.

Their will is as keen as their blades once were, he thought. Though we are dead and buried, the spark of bloody purpose burns bright in our souls.

It was the hatred of humankind that kept the spark alive—that and the black magic of the warlock Bruin Fadda. More than half of their company of warriors had already expired and been drawn to the afterlife, but still five score remained to complete their duties should they be called upon.

Remember your orders, the elfin warlock had told them all those centuries ago, even as the clay was falling on their flesh. *Remember those who have died and the humans who murdered them.*

Oro did remember and always would. Just as he could never forget the sensation of stones and earth rattling across his dying skin.

We will remember, he sent into the spiral. *Remember and return.*

The thought drifted down, then echoed up from the dead warriors, who were eager to be released from their tomb and see the sun once more.

A COMPLEX SITUATION

From the case notes of Dr. Jerbal Argon, Psych Brotherhood

1. Artemis Fowl, once self-proclaimed *teenage criminal mastermind*, now prefers the term *juvenile genius*. Apparently he has changed. (Note to self: *Harrumph.*)
2. For the past six months Artemis has been undergoing weekly therapy sessions at my clinic in Haven City in an attempt to overcome a severe case of Atlantis Complex, a psychological condition that he developed as a result of meddling in fairy magic. (Serves him right, silly Mud Boy.)
3. Remember to submit outrageous bill to Lower Elements Police.
4. Artemis appears to be cured, and in record time too. Is this likely? Or even possible?
5. Discuss my theory of relativity with Artemis. Could make for a very interesting chapter in my V-book: *Foiling Fowl: Outsmarting the Smarty-pants*. (Publishers love the title—*Ka-ching!*)
6. Order more painkillers for my blasted hip.
7. Issue clean bill of mental health for Artemis. Final session today.

Dr. Argon's office, Haven City, the Lower Elements

Artemis Fowl grew impatient. Dr. Argon was late. This final session was just as unnecessary as the past half dozen. He was completely cured, for heaven's sake, and had been since week eighteen. His prodigious intellect had

accelerated the process, and he should not have to twiddle his thumbs at the behest of a gnome psychiatrist.

At first Artemis paced the office, refusing to be calmed by the water wall, with its gently pulsing mood lights; then he sat for a minute in the oxygen booth, which he found calmed him a little too much.

Oxygen booth indeed, he thought, quickly ducking out of the chamber.

Finally the door hissed and slid aside on its track, admitting Dr. Jerbal Argon to his own office. The squat gnome limped directly to his chair. He dropped into the embrace of its padding, slapping the armrest controls until the gel sac under his right hip glowed gently.

“Aaaah,” he sighed. “My hip is killing me. Nothing helps, honestly. People think they know pain, but they have no idea.”

“You’re late,” noted Artemis in fluent Gnommish, his voice devoid of sympathy.

Argon sighed blissfully again as the heated chair pad went to work on his hip. “Always in a hurry, eh, Mud Boy? Why didn’t you have a puff of oxygen or meditate by the water wall? Hey-Hey Monks swear by those water walls.”

“I am not a pixie priest, Doctor. What Hey-Hey Monks do after first gong is of little interest to me. Can we proceed with my rehabilitation? Or would you prefer to waste more of my time?”

Argon huffed a little, then swung his bulk forward, opening a sim-paper file on his desk. “Why is it that the saner you get, the nastier you are?”

Artemis crossed his legs, his body language relaxed for the first time. “Such repressed anger, Doctor. Where does it all stem from?”

“Let’s stick to your disposition, shall we, Artemis?” Argon snagged a stack of cards from his file. “I am going to show you some inkblots, and you tell me what the shapes suggest to you.”

Artemis’s moan was extended and theatrical. “Inkblots. Oh, please. My life span is considerably shorter than yours, Doctor. I prefer not to waste valuable time on worthless pseudo-tests. We may as well read tea leaves or divine the future in turkey entrails.”

“Inkblot readings are a reliable indicator of mental health,” Argon objected. “Tried and tested.”

“Tested by psychiatrists for psychiatrists,” snorted Artemis.

Argon slapped a card down on the table. “What do you see in this inkblot?”

“I see an inkblot,” said Artemis.

“Yes, but what does the blot suggest to you?”

Artemis smirked in a supremely annoying fashion. “I see card five hundred and thirty-four.”

“Pardon me?”

“Card five hundred and thirty-four,” repeated Artemis. “Of a series of six hundred standard inkblot cards. I memorized them during our sessions. You don’t even shuffle.”

Argon checked the number on the back of the card: 534. Of course.

“Knowing the number does not answer the question. What do you see?”

Artemis allowed his lip to wobble. “I see an ax dripping with blood. Also a scared child, and an elf clothed in the skin of a troll.”

“Really?” Argon was interested now.

“No. Not really. I see a secure building, perhaps a family home, with four windows. A trustworthy pet, and a pathway leading from the door into the distance. I think, if you check your manual, you will find that these answers fall inside *healthy* parameters.”

Argon did not need to check. The Mud Boy was right, as usual. Perhaps he could blindside Artemis with his new theory. It was not part of the program but might earn him a little respect.

“Have you heard of the theory of relativity?”

Artemis blinked. “Is this a joke? I have traveled through time, Doctor. I think I know a little something about relativity.”

“No. Not that theory; my theory of relativity proposes that all things magical are related and influenced by ancient spells or magical hot spots.”

Artemis rubbed his chin. “Interesting. But I think you’ll find that your postulation should be called the theory of *relatedness*.”

“Whatever,” said Argon, waving the quibble away. “I did a little research, and it turns out that the Fowls have been a bother to fairy folk off and on for thousands of years. Dozens of your ancestors have tried for the

crook of gold, though you are the only one to have succeeded.”

Artemis sat up straight; this was interesting. “And I never knew about this because you mind-wiped my forefathers.”

“Exactly,” said Argon, thrilled to have Artemis’s full attention. “When he was a lad, your own father actually managed to hog-tie a dwarf who was drawn to the estate. I imagine he still dreams of that moment.”

“Good for him.” A thought struck Artemis. “Why was the dwarf attracted to our estate?”

“Because the residual magic there is off the scale. Something happened on the Fowl Estate once. Something huge, magically speaking.”

“And this lingering power plants ideas in the Fowls’ heads and nudges us toward a belief in magic,” Artemis murmured, almost to himself.

“Exactly. It’s a goblin-and-egg situation. Did you think about magic and then find magic? Or did the magic make you think about looking for magic?”

Artemis took a few notes on his smartphone. “And this huge magical event—can you be more specific?”

Argon shrugged. “Our records don’t go back that far. I’d say we’re talking about back when fairies lived on the surface, more than ten thousand years ago.”

Artemis rose and loomed over the squat gnome. He felt he owed the doctor something for the theory of *relatedness*, which would certainly bear some investigation.

“Dr. Argon, did you have turned-in feet as a child?”

Argon was so surprised that he blurted an honest answer to a personal question, very unusual for a psychiatrist. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“And were you forced to wear remedial shoes with stacked soles?”

Argon was intrigued. He hadn’t thought about those horrible shoes in centuries; he had actually forgotten them until this moment.

“Just one, on my right foot.”

Artemis nodded wisely, and Argon felt as though their roles had been reversed, and that he was the patient.

“I would guess that your foot was pulled into its correct alignment, but your femur was twisted slightly in the process. A simple brace should solve your hip problem.” Artemis pulled a folded napkin from his pocket. “I

sketched a design while you kept me waiting these past few sessions. Foaly should be able to build the brace for you. I may have been a few millimeters off in my estimate of your dimensions, so best to get measured.” He placed ten fingers flat on the desk. “May I leave now? Have I fulfilled my obligation?”

The doctor nodded glumly, thinking that he would possibly omit this session from his book. He watched Artemis stride across the office floor and duck through the doorway.

Argon studied the napkin drawing and knew instinctively that Artemis was right about his hip.

Either that boy is the sanest creature on earth, he thought, or he is so disturbed that our tests cannot even begin to scratch the surface.

Argon pulled a rubber stamp from his desk, and on the cover of Artemis’s file he stamped the word FUNCTIONAL in big red letters.

I hope so, he thought. I really hope so.

Artemis’s bodyguard, Butler, waited for his principal outside Dr. Argon’s office in the large chair that had been a gift from the centaur Foaly, technical consultant to the Lower Elements Police.

“I can’t stand to look at you perched on a fairy stool,” Foaly had told him. “It offends my eyes. You look like a monkey passing a coconut.”

“Very well,” Butler had said in his gravelly bass. “I accept the gift, if only to preserve your eyes.”

In truth he had been mighty glad to have a comfortable chair, being more than six and a half feet tall in a city built for three-footers.

The bodyguard stood and stretched, flattening his palms against the ceiling, which was double-height by fairy standards. Thank God Argon had a taste for the grandiose, or Butler wouldn’t even have been able to stand up straight in the clinic. To his mind, the building, with its vaulted ceilings, gold-flecked tapestries, and retro sim-wood sliding doors, looked more like a monastery where the monks had taken a vow of wealth than a medical facility. Only the wall-mounted laser hand-sanitizers and the occasional elfin nurse bustling past gave any hint that this place was actually a clinic.

I am so glad this detail is coming to an end, Butler had been thinking at least once every five minutes for the past two weeks. He had been in tight

spots many times; but there was something about being confined in a city clamped to the underside of the earth's crust that made him feel claustrophobic for the first time in his life.

Artemis emerged from Argon's office, his self-satisfied smirk even more pronounced than usual. When Butler saw this expression, he knew that his boss was back in control of his faculties and that his Atlantis Complex was certified as cured.

No more counting words. No more irrational fear of the number four. No more paranoia and delusions. Thank goodness for that.

He asked anyway, just to be certain. "Well, Artemis, how are we?"

Artemis buttoned his navy woollen suit jacket. "We are fine, Butler. That is to say that I, Artemis Fowl the Second, am one hundred percent functional, which is about five times the functionality of an average person. Or to put it another way: one point five Mozarts. Or three-quarters of a da Vinci."

"Only three-quarters? You're being modest."

"Correct," said Artemis, smiling. "I am."

Butler's shoulders sagged a little with relief. Inflated ego, supreme self-confidence. Artemis was most definitely his old self.

"Very good. Let's pick up our escort and be on our way then, shall we? I want to feel the sun on my face. The real sun, not the UV lamps they have down here."

Artemis felt a pang of sympathy for his bodyguard, an emotion he had been experiencing more and more in recent months. It was difficult enough for Butler to be inconspicuous among humans; down here he could hardly have attracted more attention if he had been wearing a clown suit and juggling fireballs.

"Very well," agreed Artemis. "We will pick up our escort and depart. Where is Holly?"

Butler jerked a thumb down the hallway. "Where she generally is. With the clone."

Captain Holly Short of the Lower Elements Police Recon division stared at the face of her archenemy and felt only pity. Of course, had she been gazing

at the real Opal Koboi and not a cloned version, then pity might not have been the last emotion on her list, but it would certainly have ranked far below *rage* and *intense dislike bordering on hatred*. But this was a clone, grown in advance to provide the megalomaniacal pixie with a body double so that she could be spirited from protective custody in the J. Argon Clinic if the LEP ever managed to incarcerate her, which they had.

Holly pitied the clone because she was a pathetic, dumb creature who had never asked to be created. Cloning was a banned science both for religious reasons and the more obvious fact that, without a life force or soul to power their systems, clones were doomed to a short life of negligent brain activity and organ failure. This particular clone had lived out most of its days in an incubator, struggling for each breath since it had been removed from the chrysalis in which it had been grown.

“Not for much longer, little one,” Holly whispered, touching the ersatz pixie’s forehead through the sterile gloves built into the incubator wall.

Holly could not have said for sure why she had begun to visit the clone. Perhaps it was because Argon had told her that no one else ever had.

She came from nowhere. She has no friends.

She had at least two friends now. Artemis had taken to joining Holly on her visits and often would sit silently beside her, which was very unusual for him.

The clone’s official designation was Unauthorized Experiment 14, but one of the clinic’s wits had named her Nopal, which was a cruel play on the name Opal and the words *no pal*. Cruel or not, the name stuck; and now even Holly used it, though with tenderness.

Argon assured her that Unauthorized Experiment 14 had no mental faculties, but Holly was certain that sometimes Nopal’s milky eyes reacted when she visited. Could the clone actually recognize her?

Holly gazed at Nopal’s delicate features and was inevitably reminded of the clone’s gene donor.

That pixie is poison, she thought bitterly. Whatever she touches withers and dies.

Artemis entered the room and stood beside Holly, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder.

“They’re wrong about Nopal,” said Holly. “She feels things. She

understands.”

Artemis knelt down. “I know. I taught her something last week. Watch.”

He placed his hand on the glass, tapping his fingers in sequence slowly, building up a rhythm. “It is an exercise developed by Cuba’s Dr. Parnassus. He uses it to generate a response from infants, even chimpanzees.”

Artemis continued to tap, and slowly Nopal responded, raising her hand laboriously to Artemis’s, slapping the glass clumsily in an attempt to copy his rhythm.

“There, you see?” said Artemis. “Intelligence.”

Holly bumped him gently, shoulder to shoulder, which was her version of a hug. “I knew your brains would eventually come in handy.”

The acorn cluster on the breast of Holly’s LEP jumpsuit vibrated, and Holly touched her wi-tech earring, accepting the call. A quick glance at her wrist computer told her that the call was from LEP technical consultant Foaly, and that the centaur had labeled it *urgent*.

“Foaly. What is it? I’m at the clinic, babysitting Artemis.”

The centaur’s voice was crystal clear over the Haven City wireless network.

“I need you back at Police Plaza, right now. Bring the Mud Boy.”

The centaur sounded theatrical, but then Foaly would play the drama queen if his carrot soufflé collapsed.

“That’s not how it works, Foaly. Consultants don’t give orders to captains.”

“We have a Koboï sighting coming through on a satellite. It’s a live feed,” countered the technical consultant.

“We’re on our way,” said Holly, severing the connection.

They picked up Butler in the corridor. Artemis, Holly, and Butler were three allies who had weathered battlefields, rebellions, and conspiracy together and had developed their own crisis shorthand.

Butler saw that Holly was wearing her business face.

“Situation?”

Holly strode past, forcing the others to follow.

“Opal,” she said in English.

Butler’s face hardened. “Eyes on?”

“Satellite link.”

“Origin?” asked the bodyguard.

“Unknown.”

They hurried down the retro corridor toward the clinic’s courtyard. Butler outstripped the group and held open the old-fashioned hinged door with its stained window depicting a thoughtful doctor comforting a weeping patient.

“Are we taking the Stick?” asked the bodyguard, his tone suggesting that he would rather not take *the Stick*.

Holly walked through the doorway. “Sorry, big man. Stick time.”

Artemis had never been one for public transport, human or fairy, and so asked, “What’s the stick?”

The Stick was the street name for a series of conveyor belts that ran in parallel strips along Haven City’s network of blocks. It was an ancient and reliable mode of transport from a less litigious time, which operated on a hop-on/hop-off basis similar to certain human airport-walkway systems. There were platforms throughout the city, and all a person had to do was step onto a belt and grab hold of one of the carbon-fiber stalks that sprouted from it. Hence the name *Stick*.

Artemis and Butler had of course seen the Stick before, but Artemis had never planned to use such an undignified mode of transport and so had never even bothered to find out its name. Artemis knew that, with his famous lack of coordination, any attempt to hop casually onto the belt would result in a humiliating tumble. For Butler, the problem was not one of coordination or lack of it. He knew that, with his bulk, it would be difficult just to fit his feet within the belt’s width.

“Ah, yes,” said Artemis. “*The Stick*. Surely a green cab would be faster?”

“Nope,” said Holly, hustling Artemis up the ramp to the platform, then poking him in the kidneys at just the right time so that he stepped unconsciously onto the belt, his hand landing on a stick’s bulbous grip.

“Hey,” said Artemis, perhaps the third time in his life he had used a

slang expletive. “I did it.”

“Next stop, the Olympics,” said Holly, who had mounted the belt behind him. “Come on, bodyguard,” she called over her shoulder to Butler. “Your principal is heading toward a tunnel.”

Butler shot the elf a look that would have cowed a bull. Holly was a dear friend, but her teasing could be relentless. He tiptoed onto the belt, squeezing his enormous feet onto a single section and bending his knees to grasp the tiny stick. In silhouette, he looked like the world’s bulkiest ballerina attempting to pluck a flower.

Holly might have grinned had Opal Koboï not been on her mind.

The Stick belt trundled its passengers from the Argon Clinic along the border of an Italian-style piazza toward a low tunnel, which had been laser-cut from solid rock. Fairies lunching alfresco froze with forkfuls of salad halfway to their mouths as the unlikely trio passed by.

The sight of a jumpsuit-clad LEP officer was common enough on a Stick belt, but a gangly human boy dressed like an undertaker and a troll-sized, buzz-cut man-mountain were quite unusual.

The tunnel was barely three feet high, so Butler was forced to prostrate himself over three sections, flattening several handgrips in the process. His nose was no more than a few feet from the tunnel wall, which he noticed was engraved with beautiful luminous pictograms depicting episodes from the People’s history.

So the young fairies can learn something about their own heritage each time they pass through. How wonderful, thought Butler; but he suppressed his admiration, as he had long ago disciplined his brain to concentrate on bodyguard duties and not waste neurons being amazed while he was belowground.

Save it for retirement, he thought. Then you can cast your mind back and appreciate art.

Police Plaza was a cobbled crest into which the shape of the Lower Elements Police acorn insignia had been painstakingly paved by master craftsmen. It was a total waste of effort as far as the LEP officers were concerned, as they were not generally the type who were inclined to gaze out of the fourth-floor

windows and marvel at how the sim-sunlight caught the rim of each gold-leafed cobble and set the whole arrangement a-twinkling.

On this particular day it seemed that everyone on the fourth floor had slid from their cubicles like pebbles on a tilted surface and gathered in a tight cluster by the Situation room, which adjoined Foaly's office/laboratory.

Holly made directly for the narrowest section of the throng and used sharp elbows to inch through the strangely silent crowd. Butler simply cleared his throat once and the crowd peeled apart as though magnetically repelled from the giant human. Artemis took this path into the Situation room to find Commander Trouble Kelp and Foaly standing before a wall-sized screen, raptly following unfolding events.

Foaly noticed the gasps that followed Butler wherever he went in Haven, and glanced around.

"May the fours be with you," the centaur whispered to Artemis—his standard greeting/joke for the past six months.

"I am cured, as you well know," said Artemis. "What is going on here?"

Holly cleared a space beside Trouble Kelp, who seemed to be morphing into her former boss, Commander Julius Root, as the years went on. Commander Kelp was so brimfull of gung-ho attitude that he had taken the name Trouble upon graduation and had once tried to arrest a troll for littering, which accounted for the sim-skin patch on the tip of his nose, which glowed yellow from a certain angle.

"Haircut's new, Skipper," Holly said. "Beetroot had one just like it."

Commander Kelp did not take his eyes from the screen. Holly was joshing because she was nervous, and Trouble knew it. She was right to be nervous. In fact, outright fear would have been more appropriate, given the situation that was being beamed in to them.

"Watch the show, Captain," he said tightly. "It's pretty self-explanatory."

There were three figures onscreen, a kneeling prisoner and two captors; but Holly did not place Opal Koboï right away because she was searching for the pixie among the standing pair. She realized with a jolt that Opal was the prisoner.

"This is a trick," she said. "It must be."

Commander Kelp shrugged. *Watch it and see.*

Artemis stepped closer to the screen, scanning the picture for information. “You are sure this is live?”

“It’s a live feed,” said Foaly. “I suppose they could be sending us a pre-record.”

“Where is it coming from?”

Foaly checked the tracer map on his own screen. The call line ran from a fairy satellite down to South Africa and from there to Miami and then on to a hundred other places, like the scribble of an angry child.

“They jacked a satellite and ran the line through a series of shells. Could be anywhere.”

“The sun is high,” Artemis mused aloud. “I would guess by the shadows that it is early noon. If it is actually a live feed.”

“That narrows it down to a quarter of the planet,” said Foaly caustically.

The hubbub in the room rose as, onscreen, one of the two bulky gnomes standing behind Opal drew a human automatic handgun, the chrome weapon looking like a cannon in his fairy fingers.

It seemed as though the temperature had suddenly dropped in the Situation room.

“I need quiet,” said Artemis. “Get these people out of here.”

On most days Trouble Kelp would argue that Artemis had no authority to clear a room, and would possibly invite more people into the cramped office just to prove his point—but this was not most days.

“Everybody out,” he barked at the assembled officers. “Holly, Foaly, and the Mud Boy, stay where you are.”

“I think perhaps I’ll stay too,” said Butler, shielding the top of his head from lamp burn with one hand.

Nobody objected.

Usually the LEP officers would shuffle with macho reluctance when ordered to move, but in this instance they rushed to the nearest monitor, eager not to miss a single frame of unfolding events.

Foaly shut the door behind them with a swing of his hoof, then darkened the window glass so there would be no distraction from outside. The remaining four stood in a ragged semicircle before the wall screen, watching

what would appear to be the last minutes of Opal Koboi's life. *One* of the Opal Kobois, at any rate.

There were two gnomes onscreen, both wearing full-face anti-UV party masks that could be programmed to resemble anyone. These had been modeled on Pip and Kip, two popular kitty-cat cartoon characters on TV, but the figures were still recognizable as gnomes because of their stocky barrel torsos and bloated forearms. They stood before a nondescript gray wall, looming over the tiny pixie who knelt in the mud tracks of some wheeled vehicle, waterline creeping along the legs of her designer tracksuit. Opal's wrists were bound and her mouth taped, and she seemed genuinely terrified.

The gnome with the pistol spoke through a vox-box in the mask, disguising his voice as Pip the kitty-cat.

"I can't make it any plainer," he squeaked, and somehow the cartoon voice made him seem more dangerous. "We got one Opal, you got the other. You let your Opal go, and we don't kill this one. You had twenty minutes; now you have fifteen."

Pip the kitty-cat cocked his weapon.

Butler tapped Holly's shoulder.

"Did he just say—?"

"Yeah. Fifteen minutes, or Opal's dead."

Butler popped a translator bud into his ear. This was too important to trust to his dubious grasp of Gnommish.

Trouble Kelp was incredulous. "What kind of deal is that? Give us a terrorist, or we kill a terrorist?"

"We can't just let someone be murdered before our eyes," said Holly.

"Absolutely not," agreed Foaly. "We are not humans."

Artemis cleared his throat.

"Sorry, Artemis," said the centaur. "But you humans are a bloodthirsty bunch. Sure, we may produce the occasional power-crazed pixie, but by and large the People are peace-loving folk. Which is probably why we live down here in the first place."

Trouble Kelp actually snarled, one of his leadership devices—which not

many people could carry off, especially when they stood barely more than three feet high in what Artemis was sure were stacked boots. But Trouble's snarl was convincing enough to stifle the bickering.

"Focus, people," he said. "I need solutions here. Under no circumstances can we release Opal Koboi, but we can't just stand by and allow her to be murdered either."

The computer had picked up the references to Koboi onscreen and had elected to run her file on a side screen, in case anyone needed their memory refreshed.

Opal Koboi. Certified genius pixie industrialist and inventor. Orchestrated the goblin coup and insurrection. Cloned herself to escape prison and attempted to lead the humans to Haven. Responsible for the murder of Commander Julius Root. Had human pituitary gland implanted to manufacture growth hormone (subsequently removed). Younger version of Opal followed Captain Short from the past and is currently at large in present time line. It is assumed she will attempt to free her incarcerated self and return to her own time stream. Opal is in the unprecedented position of occupying places one and two on the LEP Most Dangerous list. Categorized as highly intelligent, motivated, and psychotic.

This is a bold move, Opal, thought Artemis. And with potentially catastrophic repercussions.

He felt rather than saw Holly at his elbow.

"What do you think, Artemis?"

Artemis frowned. "My first impression is to call it a bluff. But Opal's plans always take into account first impressions."

"It could be a ruse. Perhaps those goblins would simply shoot her with a blank?"

Artemis shook his head. "No. That would deliver no payoff other than momentary horror on our part. Opal has planned this so that she wins whatever the eventuality. If you free her, then she's free. If the younger Opal dies, then...Then what?"

Butler weighed in. "You can do all sorts of things with special effects these days. What if they computer-graphic her head to explode?"

Artemis was disappointed in this theory, which he felt he had already

discounted. “No, Butler. Think. Again, there’s nothing to gain.”

Foaly snorted. “At any rate, if they do kill her, we will know very soon whether this whole thing is real or not.”

Artemis half laughed. “True. We will certainly know.”

Butler groaned. This was one of those times when Artemis and Foaly were aware of something *sciencey* and assumed that everyone else in the room also had all the facts. Moments like this were guaranteed to drive Holly crazy.

“What are you talking about?” shouted Holly. “What will we know? How will we know whatever it is?”

Artemis stared down at her as though waking from a dream. “Really, Holly? You have two versions of the same individual occupying a time stream, and you are unaware of the ramifications?”

Onscreen, the gnomes stood like statues behind the shivering pixie. The armed one, Pip, occasionally checked a wristwatch by tugging his sleeve with his gun barrel, but otherwise they waited patiently. Opal pleaded with her eyes, staring at the camera lens, fat tears streaming down her cheeks, sparkling in the sunlight. Her hair seemed thinner than usual and unwashed. Her Juicy Couture tracksuit, purchased no doubt from the children’s section of some exclusive store, was torn in several places, the rips caked in blood. The picture was super-high-def and so clear that it was like looking through a window. If this was a spurious threat, then young Opal did not know it.

Trouble pounded the desk, an affectation of Julius Root’s that he had adopted.

“What are the ramifications? Tell me?”

“Just to be clear,” said Artemis, “do you wish to be told what the word *ramifications* means? Or to know what the ramifications *are*?”

Holly elbowed Artemis in the hip, speeding him along. “Artemis, we’re on a clock here.”

“Very well, Holly. Here is the problem ...”

“Come on,” pleaded Foaly. “Let me explain. This is my kingdom, and I will be simple and to the point, I promise.”

“Go on, then,” said Trouble, who was known for his love of *simple and*

to the point.

Holly laughed, a single harsh bark. She could not believe everyone continued to act like their everyday selves even though a life was at stake.

We have become desensitized, like the humans.

Whatever Opal had done, she was still a person. There had been dark days when Holly had dreamed of hunting the pixie down and issuing a little Mud Man justice, but those days were gone.

Foaly tugged at his outrageously coiffed forelock.

“All beings are made of energy,” he began in the typical pompous *imparting important info* voice that he used at times like this. “When these beings die, their energy slowly dissipates and returns to the earth.” He paused dramatically. “But what if a being’s entire existence is suddenly negated by a quantum anomaly?”

Trouble raised his arms. “Whoa! Simple and to the point, remember?”

Foaly rephrased. “Okay. If young Opal dies, then old Opal cannot continue to exist.”

It took Trouble a second, but he got it. “So, will it be like the movies? She will fizzle out of existence, and we will all look a bit puzzled for a moment, then forget about her?”

Foaly snickered. “That’s one theory.”

“What’s the other theory?”

The centaur paled suddenly, and uncharacteristically yielded the floor to Artemis.

“Why don’t you explain this bit?” Foaly said. “I just flashed on what could actually happen, and I need to start making calls.”

Artemis nodded curtly. “The *other* theory was first postulated by your own Professor Bahjee over five centuries ago. Bahjee believes that if the time stream is polluted by the arrival of the younger version of a being and that younger version subsequently dies, then the present-tense version of the being will release all its energy spontaneously and violently. Not only that, but anything that exists because of the younger Opal will also combust.”

Violently and *combust* were words that Commander Kelp understood well.

“Release its energy? How violently?”

Artemis shrugged. “That depends on the object or being. Matter is changed instantaneously into energy. A huge explosive force will be released. We could even be talking about nuclear fission.”

Holly felt her heart speed up. “Fission? Nuclear fission?”

“Basically,” said Artemis. “For living beings. The objects should cause less damage.”

“Anything Opal made or contributed to will explode?”

“No. Just the things she influenced in the past five years of our time line, between her two ages, though there will probably be some temporal ripples on either side.”

“Are you talking about all of her company’s weapons that are still in commission?” asked Holly.

“And the satellites,” added Trouble. “Every second vehicle in the city.”

“It is just a theory,” said Artemis. “There is yet another theory that suggests nothing at all will happen, other than one person dying. Physics trumps quantum physics, and things go on as normal.”

Holly found herself red-faced with sudden fury. “You’re talking as though Opal is already dead.”

Artemis was not sure what to say. “We are staring into the abyss, Holly. In a short time, many of us could be dead. I need to stay detached.”

Foaly looked up from his computer panel. “What do you think about the percentages, Mud Boy?”

“Percentages?”

“Theory-wise.”

“Oh, I see. How likely are the explosions?”

“Exactly.”

Artemis thought about it. “All things considered, I would say about ninety percent. If I were a betting man and there were someone to take this kind of bet, I would put my last gold coin on it.”

Trouble paced the small office. “We need to release Opal. Let her go immediately.”

Now Holly was uncertain. “Let’s think about this, Trubs.”

The commander turned on her. “Didn’t you hear what the human said?”

Fission! We can't have fission underground.”

“I agree, but it could still be a trick.”

“The alternative is too terrible. We turn her loose and hunt her down. Get Atlantis on the line now. I need to speak to the warden at the Deeps. Is it still Vinyáya?”

Artemis spoke quietly but with the commanding tone that had made him a natural leader since the age of ten.

“It's too late to free Opal. All we can do is save her life. That's what she planned for all along.”

“Save her life?” objected Trouble. “But we still have...” Commander Kelp checked the countdown clock. “Ten minutes.”

Artemis patted Holly's shoulder, then stepped away from her. “If fairy bureaucracy is anything like the human kind, you won't be able to get Opal into a shuttle in that time. What you might be able to do is get her down to the reactor core.”

Kelp had not yet learned the hard way to shut up and let Artemis explain, and so kept asking questions, slowing down the process, wasting valuable seconds.

“Reactor core? What reactor core?”

Artemis raised a finger. “One more question, Commander, and I will be forced to have Butler restrain you.”

Kelp was a breath away from ejecting Artemis or charging him with something, but the situation was critical and if there was a chance that this human could in some way help...

He clenched his fists till his fingers creaked. “Okay. Talk.”

“The Deeps is powered by a natural fission reactor in a uranium ore layer set on a bed of granite similar to the one in Oklo, Gabon,” said Artemis, tugging the facts from his memory. “The People's Power Company harvests the energy in small pods set into the uranium. These pods are constructed with science and magic to withstand a moderate nuclear blast. This is taught in schools here. Every fairy in the room knows this, correct?”

Everyone nodded. Technically it was correct, as they did know it *now*.

“If we can place Opal inside the pod before the deadline, then the blast will at least be contained and theoretically, if we pump in enough anti-rad

foam, Opal might even retain her physical integrity. Though *that* is something I would not bet my last gold coin on. Opal, apparently, is prepared to take the risk.”

Trouble was tempted to poke Artemis in the chest but wisely resisted. “You’re saying that all of this is an elaborate escape plan?”

“Of course,” said Artemis. “And not all that elaborate. Opal is forcing you to release her from her cell. The alternative is the utter destruction of Atlantis and every soul in it, which is unthinkable to anyone except Opal herself.”

Foaly had already brought up the prison plans. “The reactor core is less than a hundred yards below Opal’s cell. I’m contacting the warden now.”

Holly knew that Artemis was a genius and that there was no one more qualified to second-guess kidnapers. But still, they had options.

She gazed at the figures onscreen and was chilled by how casual the gnomes seemed, in the light of what they were about to do. They slouched like adolescents, barely glancing at their captive, cocky in their abilities and not even a jot self-conscious about their cartoon-character smart-masks, which “read” their faces and displayed the appropriate emotions in exaggerated cartoon style. Smart-masks were very popular with the karaoke crowd, who could then look like their idols as well as trying to sound like them.

Perhaps they don’t know exactly what’s at stake here, Holly thought suddenly. Perhaps they are as clueless as I was ten seconds ago.

“Can they hear us?” she asked Foaly.

“They can, but we haven’t responded yet. Just press the button.”

This was just an old figure of speech; there was of course no actual button, just a sensor on the touch screen.

“Hold it, Captain!” ordered Trouble.

“I am a trained negotiator, sir,” said Holly, hoping the respect in her tone would get her what she wanted. “And I was once ...” She glanced guiltily at Artemis, sorry that she had to play this card. “I was once a hostage myself, so I know how these things go. Let me talk to them.”

Artemis nodded encouragingly, and Holly knew that he understood her tactics.

“Captain Short is correct, Commander,” he said. “Holly is a natural communicator. She even managed to get through to me.”

“Do it,” barked Trouble. “Foaly, you keep trying to reach Atlantis. And assemble the Council; we need to begin evacuating both cities now.”

Though you could not see their real faces, the gnomes’ cartoon expressions were bored now. It was in the slant of their heads and the bend of their knees. Perhaps this whole thing was not as exciting as they hoped it would be. After all, they could not see their audience, and no one had responded to their threats. What had started out as a revolutionary action was now beginning to look like two big gnomes picking on a pixie.

Pip wagged his gun at Kip, and the meaning was clear. *Why don’t we just shoot her now?*

Holly activated the microphone with a wave of her hand.

“Hello, you there. This is Captain Holly Short of the LEP. Can you hear me?”

The gnomes perked up immediately, and Pip even attempted a whistle, which came through the vox-box as a raspberry.

“Hey, Captain Short. We heard of you. I’ve seen pictures. Not too shabby, Captain.”

Holly bit back a caustic retort. Never force a kidnapper to demonstrate his resolve.

“Thank you, Pip. Should I call you Pip?”

“You, Holly Short, can call me anything and *any time* you like,” squeaked Pip, and he extended his free hand toward his partner for a knuckle bump.

Holly was incredulous. These two were about to totally incapacitate the entire fairy world, and they were goofing about like two goblins at a fireball party.

“Okay, Pip,” she continued evenly. “What can we do for you today?”

Pip shook his head sorrowfully at Kip. “Why are the pretty ones always stupid?” He turned to the camera. “You know what you can do for us. We told you already. Release Opal Koboi, or the younger model is gonna take a long sleep. And by that I mean, get shot in the head.”

“You need to give us some time to show good faith. Come on, Pip. One more hour? For me?”

Pip scratched his head with the gun barrel, pretending to consider it. “You are cute, Holly. But not *that* cute. If I give you another hour, you’ll track me down somehow and drop a time-stop on my head. No thanks, Cap. You have ten minutes. If I was you, I would get that cell open or call the undertaker.”

“This kind of thing takes time, Pip,” persisted Holly, repeating the name, forging a bond. “It takes three days to pay a parking fine.”

Pip shrugged. “Not my problem, babe. And you can call me Pip all day and it won’t make us BFFs. It ain’t my real name.”

Artemis deactivated the microphone. “This one is smart, Holly. Don’t play with him, just tell the truth.”

Holly nodded and switched on the mike. “Okay, whatever your name is. Let me give it to you straight. There’s a good chance that if you shoot young Opal, then we’re going to have a series of very big explosions down here. A lot of innocent people will die.”

Pip waved his gun carelessly. “Oh yeah, the quantum laws. We know about that, don’t we, Kip?”

“Quantum laws,” said Kip. “Of course we know about that.”

“And you don’t care that good fairies, gnomes that could be related to you, will die?”

Pip raised his eyebrows so that they jugged over the top of the mask. “You like any of your family, Kip?”

“Ain’t got no family. I’m an orphan.”

“Really? Me too.”

While they bantered, Opal shivered in the dirt, trying to speak through the tape. Foaly would get voice analysis on the muffled mumbles later—if there *was* a later—but it didn’t take a genius to figure out she was pleading for her life.

“There must be something you need,” said Holly.

“There is one thing,” replied Pip. “Could I get your com-code? I sure would love to hook up for a sim-latte when this is all over. Might be a while, of course, what with Haven City being in ruins.”

Foaly put a text box on the screen. It read: *They're moving Opal now.*

Holly fluttered her eyelids to show she understood, then continued with the negotiation. "Here's the situation, Pip. We have nine minutes left. You can't get someone out of Atlantis in nine minutes. It's not possible. They need to suit up, pressurize, maybe; go through the conduits to open sea. Nine minutes is not long enough."

Pip's theatrical responses were getting a little hard to take. "Well then, I guess a lot of people are going swimming. Fission can put a hell of a hole in the shield."

Holly broke. "Don't you care about anyone? What's the going rate for genocide?"

Pip and Kip actually laughed.

"It's a horrible feeling, impotency, ain't it?" said Pip. "But there are worse feelings. Drowning, for example."

"And getting crushed by falling buildings," added Kip.

Holly banged her tiny fists on the console.

These two are so infuriating.

Pip stepped close to the camera, so that his mask filled the screen. "If I don't get a call from Opal Koboï in the next few minutes telling me she is in a shuttle on her way to the surface, then I will shoot this pixie. Believe it."

Foaly rested his head in his hands. "I used to love Pip and Kip," he said.

CHAPTER 2

KILLING THE PAST

The Deeps, Atlantis

Opal Koboï was making a futile attempt to levitate when the guards came for her. It was something she had been able to do as a child before her chosen life of crime had stripped the magic from her synapses, the tiny junctions between nerve cells where most experts agreed magic originated. Her power might have regenerated if it hadn't been for the human pituitary gland she'd had briefly attached to her hypothalamus. Levitation was a complicated art, especially for pixies with their limited powers, and usually a state only achieved by Hey-Hey Monks of the Third Balcony; but Opal had managed it while still in diapers, which had been her parents' first sign that their daughter was a little bit special.

Imagine it, she thought. I wished to be human. That was a mistake for which I will eventually find someone to blame. The centaur, Foaly—he drove me to it. I do hope he is killed in the explosion.

Opal smirked in self-satisfaction. There had been a time when she'd whiled away the prison monotony by concocting ever more elaborate death traps for her centaur nemesis, but now she was content to let Foaly die with the rest in the imminent explosions. Granted, she had cooked up a little surprise for his wife; but this was merely a side project and not something she had spent too much time on.

It is a measure of how far I have come, Opal thought. I have matured somewhat. The veil has lifted, and I see my true purpose.

There had been a time when Opal had simply been a ruthless business fairy with daddy issues; but somewhere during the years of banned experimentation, she had allowed black magic to fester in her soul and let it

warp her heart's desire until it was not enough to be lauded in her own city. She needed the world to bow down, and she was prepared to risk everything and sacrifice anyone to see her wish fulfilled.

This time it will be different, for I will have fearsome warriors bound to my will. Ancient soldiers who will die for me.

Opal cleared her mind and sent out a probe searching for her other self. All that came back was the white noise of terror.

She knows, Opal realized. Poor thing.

This moment of sympathy for her younger self did not last long, as the imprisoned Opal had learned not to live in the past.

I am merely killing a memory, she thought. That is all.

Which was a convenient way of looking at it.

Her cell door phase-changed from solid to gas, and Opal was unsurprised to see Warden Tarpon Vinyáya, a malleable pen pusher who had never spent a night outside under the moon, fidgeting in her doorway, flanked by two jumbo pixie guards.

“Warden,” she said, abandoning her levitation attempt. “Has my pardon arrived?”

Tarpon had no time for pleasantries. “We’re moving you, Kobo. No discussion; just come along.”

He gestured to his guards. “Wrap her up, boys.”

The jumbo pixies strode rapidly into the room, wordlessly pinning Opal’s arms to her sides. Jumbo pixies were a breed peculiar to Atlantis, where the particular blend of pressurized environment and algae-based filtration had caused them to pop up with increased regularity over the years. What the jumbo pixies gained in brawn they generally sacrificed in brains, and so they made the ideal prison guards, having no respect for anyone smaller than themselves who did not sign their paychecks.

Before Opal could open her mouth to voice an objection, the pixies had bundled her into a lined anti-radiation suit and clipped three bungee cords around her torso.

The warden sighed, as if he had been expecting Opal to somehow disable his guards. Which he had.

“Good. Good,” he said, mopping his high brow with a handkerchief. “Take her to the basement. Don’t touch any of the pipes, and avoid breathing if possible.”

The pixies hefted their captive between them like a rolled rug and double-timed it from Opal’s cell, across the narrow bridge that linked her cell-pod to the main prison, and into the service elevator.

Opal smiled behind the heavy lead gauze of her headpiece.

This certainly is the day for Opal Kobois to be manhandled by burly boys.

She beamed a thought to her younger self on the surface.

I feel for you, sister.

The elevator cube flashed downward through a hundred yards of soft sandstone to a small chamber composed entirely of hyperdense material harvested from the crust of a neutron star.

Opal guessed they had arrived at the chamber, and giggled at the memory of a stupid gnome in her high school who had asked what neutron stars were made of.

Neutrons, boy, Professor Leguminous had snapped. Neutrons! The clue is in the name.

This chamber held the record for being the most expensive room per square inch to construct anywhere on the planet, though it looked a little like a concrete furnace room. At one end was the elevator door; at the other were what looked like four missile tubes; and in the middle was an extremely grumpy dwarf.

“You are bleeping joking me?” he said, belly thrust out belligerently.

The jumbo pixies dumped Opal on the gray floor.

“Orders, pal,” said one. “Put her in the tube.”

The dwarf shook his head stubbornly. “I ain’t putting no one in a tube. Them tubes is built for rods.”

“I do believe,” said the second pixie, very proud of himself for remembering the information he was about to deliver, “that one of them reactor sites is depleted so the tube do be empty.”

“That sounded pretty good, Jumbo, except for the *do be* at the end,” said

the dwarf, whose name was Kolin Ozkopy. “But even so, I need to know how the consequences of *not* putting a person in a tube are worse than the consequences of putting them in one?”

A sentence of this length would take a jumbo pixie several minutes to digest; luckily, they were spared the embarrassment of being pressed for an explanation when Kolin’s phone rang.

“Just a sec,” he said, checking caller ID. “It’s the warden.”

Kolin answered the phone with a flourish. “Y’ello. Engineer Ozkopy here.”

Ozkopy listened for a long moment, interjecting three *uh-huhs* and two *D’Arvits* before pocketing the phone.

“Wow,” he said, prodding the radiation suit with his toe. “I guess you’d better put her in the tube.”

Police Plaza, Haven City, The Lower Elements

Pip wagged his phone at the camera.

“You hear anything? Because I don’t. No one is calling this number, and I’ve got five bars. One hundred percent planetary coverage. Hell, I once took a call on a spaceship.”

Holly swiped the mike sensor. “We’re moving as fast as we can. Opal Koboi is in the shuttle bay right now. We just need ten more minutes.”

Pip adopted a singsong voice.

“Never tell a lie, just to get you by.

Never tell a tale, lest you go to jail.”

Foaly found himself humming along. It was the Pip and Kip theme song. Holly glared at him.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

Artemis grew impatient with the fruitless wrangling. “This is futile and, frankly, embarrassing. They have no intention of releasing Opal. We should evacuate now, at least to the shuttle bays. They are built to withstand magma flares.”

Foaly disagreed. “We’re secure here. The real danger is in Atlantis. That’s where the other Opal is. You said, and I concur, that the serious explosions, theoretical explosions, only occur with living beings.”

“Theoretical explosions are only theoretical until the theory is proven,” countered Artemis. “And with so many—” He stopped mid-sentence, which was very unlike him, as Artemis detested both poor grammar and poor manners. His skin tone faded from pale to porcelain, and he actually rapped his own forehead.

“Stupid. Stupid. Foaly, we are both imbeciles. I don’t expect lateral thinking from the LEP, but from you...”

Holly recognized this tone. She had heard it during previous adventures, generally before things went catastrophically wrong.

“What is it?” she asked, afraid of the answer, which must surely be terrible.

“Yeah,” agreed Foaly, who always had time to feel insulted. “Why am I an imbecile?”

Artemis pointed an index finger diagonally down and southwest in the approximate direction they had come from the J. Argon Clinic.

“The oxygen booth has addled my senses,” he said. “The clone. Nopal. She’s a living being. If she explodes, it could go nuclear.”

Foaly accessed the clone’s file on Argon’s Web site, navigating with blurred speed to the patient details.

“No. I think we should be okay there. Opal harvested her own DNA before the time line split.”

Artemis was angry with himself all the same for momentarily forgetting the clone.

“We were minutes into this crisis before the clone’s relevance occurred to me,” he said. “If Nopal had been created at a later date, my slow thinking could have cost lives.”

“There are still plenty of lives at stake,” said Foaly. “We need to save as many as we can.”

The centaur popped a Plexiglas cover on the wall and pressed the red button underneath. Instantly a series of Evac sirens began to wail throughout the city. The eerie sound spread like the keening of mothers receiving the bad

news of their nightmares.

Foaly chewed a nail. “There’s no time to wait for Council approval,” he said to Trouble Kelp. “Most should make it to the shuttle bays. But we need to ready the emergency resuscitation teams.”

Butler was less than happy with the idea of losing Artemis. “Nobody’s death is impending.”

His principal didn’t seem overly concerned. “Well, technically, *everybody’s* death is impending.”

“Shut up, Artemis!” snapped Butler, which was a major breach of his own professional ethics. “I promised your mother that I would look after you, and yet again you have put me in a position where my brawn and skills count for nothing.”

“That is hardly fair,” said Artemis. “I hardly think that I can be blamed for Opal’s latest stunt.”

Butler’s face blazed a few shades redder than Artemis could remember having seen it. “I do think you can be blamed, and I do blame you. We’re barely clear of the consequences of your last misadventure, and here we are neck deep in another one.”

Artemis seemed more shocked by this outburst than by the *impending death* situation.

“Butler, I had no idea you were harboring such frustration.”

The bodyguard rubbed his cropped head.

“Neither had I,” he admitted. “But for the past few years it’s been one thing after another. Goblins, time travel, demons. Now this place where everything is so...so...small.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Okay. I said it, it’s out there. And I am fine now. So let’s move on, shall we? What’s the plan?”

“Keep evacuating,” said Artemis. “No more empowering those hostage-taking nitwits; they have their instructions. Drop the blast doors, which should help absorb some of the shock waves.”

“We have our strategies in place, human,” said Trouble Kelp. “The entire population can be at their assembly points in five minutes.”

Artemis paced, thinking. “Tell your people to dump their weapons into the magma chutes. Leave anything that might have Koboï technology behind.

Phones, games, everything.”

“All Koboi weaponry has been retired,” said Holly. “But some of the older Neutrinos might have a chip or two.”

Trouble Kelp had the grace to look guilty. “*Some* of the Koboi weaponry has been retired,” he said. “Budget cuts—you know how it is.”

Pip interrupted their preparations by actually rapping on the camera lens.

“Hey, LEP people. I’m getting old here. Somebody say something, anything. Tell us more lies—we don’t care.”

Artemis’s eyebrows furrowed and joined. He did not appreciate such flippant posturing when many lives were at stake. He pointed at the microphone.

“May I?”

Trouble barely looked up from his emergency calls and made a vague gesture that was open to interpretation. Artemis chose to interpret it as an affirmative.

He approached the screen. “Listen to me, you lowlife. This is Artemis Fowl. You may have heard of me.”

Pip grinned, and his mask echoed the expression.

“Oooh, Artemis Fowl. Wonder boy. We’ve heard of you alright, haven’t we, Kip?”

Kip nodded, dancing a little jig. “Artemis Fowl, the Oirish boy who chased leprechauns. Sure and begorra everyone has heard of that smarty-pants.”

These two are stupid, thought Artemis. They are stupid and talk too much, and I should be able to exploit those weaknesses.

He tried a ruse.

“I thought I told you to read your demands and say nothing more.”

Pip’s face was literally a mask of confusion. “You told us?”

Artemis hardened his voice. “My instructions for you two idiots were to read the demands, wait until the time was up, then shoot the pixie. I don’t recall saying anything about trading insults.”

Pip’s mask frowned. *How did Artemis Fowl know their instructions?*

“Your instructions? We don’t take orders from you.”

“Really? Explain to me then how I know your instructions to the letter.”

Pip’s mask software was not able to cope with his rapid expression change and froze momentarily.

“I...ah...I don’t...”

“And tell me how I knew the exact frequency to tap into.”

“You’re not in Police Plaza?”

“Of course not, you idiot. I’m at the rendezvous point waiting for Opal.”

Artemis felt his heart speed up, and he waited a second for his conscious mind to catch up with his subconscious and tell him what he recognized onscreen.

Something in the background.

Something familiar.

The wall behind Pip and Kip was nondescript gray, rendered with roughly finished plaster. A common finish for farm walls worldwide. There were walls like this all over the Fowl Estate.

Ba boom.

There went his heart again.

Artemis concentrated on the wall. Slate-gray, except for a network of jagged cracks that sundered the plasterwork.

A memory presented itself of six-year-old Artemis and his father walking the estate. As they passed the barn wall on the upper pasture, young Artemis pointed to the wall and commented. “See, Father? The cracks form a map of Croatia, once part of the Roman, Ottoman, and Austrian Habsburg empires. Were you aware that Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991?”

There it was. On the wall behind Pip and Kip. A map of Croatia, though fifteen-year-old Artemis saw now that the Dalmatian coastline was truncated.

They are on the Fowl Estate, he realized.

Why?

Something Dr. Argon had said resurfaced.

Because the residual magic there is off the scale. Something happened

on the Fowl Estate once. Something huge, magically speaking.

Artemis decided to act on his hunch. “I’m at the Fowl Estate, waiting for Opal,” he said.

“You’re at Fowl Manor too?” blurted Kip, prompting Pip to turn rapidly and shoot his comrade in the heart. The gnome was punched backward into the wall, knocking clouds of dust from the plaster. A narrow stream of blood oozed from the hole in his chest, pulsing gently down his breastplate, as undramatic as a paint drip running down a jar. His kitty-cat cartoon face seemed comically surprised, and when the heat from his face faded, the pixels powered down, leaving a yellow question mark.

The sudden death shocked Artemis, but the preceding sentence had shocked him more.

He had been correct on both counts: not only was Opal behind this, but the rendezvous point was Fowl Manor.

Why? What had happened there?

Pip shouted at the screen. “You see what you did, human? If you *are* human. If you *are* Artemis Fowl. It doesn’t matter what you know, it’s too late.”

Pip pressed the still smoking barrel to Opal’s head, and she jerked away as the metal burned her skin, pleading through the tape over her mouth. It was clear that Pip wished to pull the trigger, but he could not.

He has his instructions, thought Artemis. He must wait until the allotted time has run out. Otherwise he cannot be certain that Opal is secure in the nuclear reactor.

Artemis deactivated the microphone and was moving toward the door when Holly caught his arm.

“There’s no time,” she said, correctly guessing that he was headed for home.

“I must try to save my family from the next stage of Opal’s plan,” said Artemis tersely. “There are five minutes left. If I can make it to a magma vent, we might be able to outrun the explosions to the surface.”

Commander Kelp quickly weighed his options. He could order Artemis to remain underground, but it would certainly be strategically advantageous to have someone track Opal Koboi if she somehow escaped from Atlantis.

“Go,” he said. “Captain Short will pilot you and Butler to the surface. Stay in contact if...”

He did not finish the sentence, but everyone in the room could guess what he had been about to say.

Stay in contact if...there is anything left to contact.

CHAPTER 3
FIRE & BRIMSTONE

The Deeps, Atlantis

Opal did not enjoy being forced into the depths of the tube by a flat-topped ramrod, but once she was down inside the neutron crust, she felt quite snugly, cushioned by a fluffy layer of anti-rad foam.

One is like a caterpillar in a chrysalis, she thought, only a little irked by the rough material of her anti-rad suit. I am about to transform into the godhead. I am about to arrive at my destiny. Bow down, creatures, or bear thine own blindness.

Then she thought, *Bear thine own blindness?* Is that too much?

There was a niggly doubt in the back of Opal's head that she had actually made a horrific mistake by setting this plan in motion. It was her most radical maneuver ever, and thousands of fairies and humans would die. Worse still, she herself might cease to exist, or morph into some kind of time-mutant. But Opal dealt with these worries by simply refusing to engage with them. It was childish, she knew; but Opal was ninety percent convinced that she was cosmically ordained to be the first Quantum Being.

The alternative was too abhorrent to be entertained for long: she, Opal Koboi, would be forced to live out her days as a common prisoner in the Deeps, an object of ridicule and derision. The subject of morality tales and school projects. A chimp in a zoo for the Atlantis fairies to stare at with round eyes. To kill everyone or even die herself would be infinitely preferable. Not that she would die. The tube would contain her energy; and with enough concentration, she would become a nuclear version of herself.

One feels one's destiny at hand. Any minute now.

Haven City

Artemis, Butler, and Holly took the express elevator to Police Plaza's own shuttleport, which was connected to a magma vent from the earth's core that supplied much of the city's power through geothermal rods. Artemis did not speak to the others; he simply muttered to himself and rapped the steel wall of the elevator with his knuckles.

Holly was relieved to find that there was no pattern in the rappings, unless, of course, the pattern was too complicated for her to perceive it. It wouldn't be the first time Artemis's thought process had been beyond her grasp.

The elevator was spacious by LEP standards and so allowed Butler enough headroom to stand up straight, though he still knocked his crown against the capsule wall whenever they hit a bump.

Finally Artemis spoke: "If we can get into the shuttle before the deadline, then we stand a real chance of making it to the magma chutes."

Artemis used the word *deadline*, but his companions knew that he meant *assassination*. Pip would shoot Opal when the time was up; none of them doubted that now. Then the consequences of this murder would unfold, whatever they might be; and their best chance of survival lay on the inside of a titanium craft that was built to withstand total immersion in a magma chimney.

The elevator hissed to a halt on pneumatic pistons and the doors opened to admit the assorted noises of utter bedlam. The shuttleport was jammed with frantic fairies fighting their way through the security checkpoints, ignoring the usual X-ray protocols and jumping over barriers and turnstiles. Sprites flew illegally low, their wings grazing the tube lighting. Gnomes huddled together in crunchball formations, attempting to barge their way through the line of LEP crowd-control officers in riot gear.

"People are forgetting their drills," muttered Holly. "This panic is not going to help anyone."

Artemis stared crestfallen at the melee. He had seen something like it once in JFK airport, when a TV reality star had turned up in Arrivals. "We won't make it through. Not without hurting people."

Butler picked up his comrades and slung one across each shoulder. "The

heck we won't," he said, stepping determinedly into the multitude.

Pip's attitude had changed since he'd shot his partner. No more chitchat or posturing; now he was following his instructions to the letter: Wait until your phone alarm beeps, then shoot the pixie.

That Fowl guy. That was bluff, right? He can't do anything now. It probably wasn't even Fowl.

Pip decided that he would never divulge what had happened here today. Silence was safety. Words would only bind themselves into strands and hang him.

She need never know.

But Pip knew that she would take one look in his eyes and know everything. For a second Pip thought about running, just disentangling himself from this entire convoluted master plan and being a plain old gnome again.

I cannot do it. She would find me. She would find me and do terrible things to me. And, for some reason, I do not wish to be free of her.

There was nothing for it but to follow the orders that he had not already disobeyed.

Perhaps, if I kill her, she will forgive me.

Pip cocked the hammer on his handgun and pressed it to the back of Opal's head.

Atlantis

In the reactor, Opal's head was buzzing with excitement. It must be soon. Very soon. She had been counting the seconds, but the bumpy elevator ride had disoriented her.

I am ready, she thought. Ready for the next step.

Pull it! she broadcast, knowing her younger self would hear the thought and panic. *Pull the trigger.*

Police Plaza

Foaly felt his forelock droop under the weight of perspiration and tried to remember what his parting comment to Caballine had been that morning.

I think I told her that I loved her. I always do. But did I say it this morning? Did I?

It seemed very important to him.

Caballine is in the suburbs. She will be out of harm's way. Fine.

The centaur did not believe his own thoughts. If Opal was behind this, there would be serpentine twists to this plan yet to be revealed.

Opal Koboï does not make plans; she writes operas.

For the first time in his life, Foaly was horrified to catch himself thinking that someone else might just be a little smarter than he was.

Police Plaza Shuttleport

Butler waded through the crowd, dropping his feet with care. His appearance in the shuttleport only served to heighten the level of panic, but that could not be helped now. Some temporary discomforts would have to be borne by certain fairies if it meant reaching their shuttle in time. Elves shoaled around his knees like cleaner-fish, several poking him with buzz batons and a couple spraying him with pheromone repellent spray, which Butler found to his great annoyance instantly shrunk his sinuses.

When they reached the security turnstile, the huge bodyguard simply stepped over it, leaving the majority of the frightened populace milling around on the other side. Butler had the presence of mind to dunk Holly in front of the retinal scanner so they could be beeped through without activating the terminal's security measures.

Holly called to a sprite she recognized on the security desk.

“Chix. Is our chute open?”

Chix Verbil had once been Holly's podmate on a stakeout and was only alive because she had dragged his wounded frame out of harm's way.

“Uh...yeah. Commander Kelp told us to make a hole. Are you okay, Captain?”

Holly dismounted from Butler's shelflike shoulder, landing with sparks from her boot heels.

“Fine.”

“Unusual mode of transport,” commented Chix, nervously hovering a foot from the floor, his reflection shimmering in the polished steel below like a sprite trapped in another dimension.

“Don’t worry, Chix,” said Holly, patting Butler’s thigh. “He’s tame. Unless he smells fear.”

Butler sniffed the air as though there were a faint scent of terror.

Chix rose a few inches, his wings a hummingbird blur. He tapped the V-board on his wrist computer with sweating digits. “Okay. You are set to go. The ground crew checked all your life support. And we popped in a fresh plasma cube while we were in there, so you’re good for a few decades. The blast doors are dropping in less than two minutes, so I would get moving if I were you and take those two Mud Men...ah, humans...with you.”

Butler decided that it would be quicker to keep Artemis pinioned on his shoulder until they were in the shuttle, as he would probably trip over a dwarf in his haste. He set off at a quick lope down the metal tube linking the check-in desk to their berth.

Foaly had managed to get a remodeling order approved for the bay so that Butler could walk under the lintel with his chin tucked low. The shuttle itself was actually an off-road vehicle confiscated by the Criminal Assets Bureau from a tuna smuggler. Its middle row of seats had been removed so that the bodyguard could stretch out in the back. Riding the off-roader was Butler’s favorite part of his underworld visits.

Off-roader! Foaly had snorted. *As if there is anywhere to go in Haven that doesn’t have roads. Plasma-guzzling status symbols, that’s all these clunkers are.*

Which hadn’t stopped him from gleefully ordering a refit so that the vehicle resembled an American Humvee and could accommodate two humans in the back. And because Artemis was one of the humans, Foaly could not help but show off a little, stuffing more extras into the confined space than would be found in the average Mars probe: gel seats, thirty-two speakers, 3-D HDTV; and for Holly, oxy-boost, and a single laser cutter in the hood ornament, which was an imp blowing a long-stemmed horn. This was why the shuttle was referred to as the *Silver Cupid*. It was a little romantic-sounding for Artemis’s taste, and so Holly referred to it by name as

often as possible.

The off-roader detected Holly's proximity and sent a message to her wrist computer inquiring whether it should pop the doors and start itself up. Holly confirmed without missing a step, and the batwing doors swung smoothly upward just in time for Butler to unload Artemis like a sack of kittens from his shoulder into the backseat. Holly slid into the single front seat in the nose of the blocky craft and had locked on to the supply rail before the doors had sealed.

Artemis and Butler leaned back and allowed the safety cinches to drop over their shoulders, pulling comfortably close on tension-sensitive rollers.

Artemis's fingers scrunched the material of his pants at the knees. Their progress down the feeder rail seemed maddeningly slow. At the end of the metal panel-clad rock tunnel they could see the vent itself, a glowing crescent yawning like the gate to hell.

"Holly," he said without parting his teeth, "please, a little acceleration."

Holly lifted her gloved hands from the wheel. "We're still on the feeder rail, Artemis. It's all automatic."

Foaly's face appeared in a heads-up display on the windshield. "I'm sorry, Artemis," he said. "I really am. We've run out of time."

"No!" said Artemis, straining against his belt. "There are fifteen seconds left. Twelve at least."

Foaly's eyes dropped to the controls before him. "We have to close the doors to ensure everyone inside the blast tunnels survives. I really am sorry, Artemis."

The off-roader jerked, then halted as the power was cut to the rail.

"We can make it," Artemis said, his voice close to a panicked wheeze.

Up ahead the mouth to hell began to close as the giant dwarf-forged gears rolled the meter-thick slatted shutters down over the vent.

Artemis grasped Holly's shoulder. "Holly? Please."

Holly rolled her eyes and flicked the controls to manual.

"D'Arvit," she said, and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

The off-roader leaped forward, jerking free from its guide rail, setting off revolving lights and warning sirens.

Onscreen, Foaly rubbed his eyelids with index fingers. "Yeah, yeah.

Here we go. Captain Short goes rogue once more. Hands up who's surprised. Anyone?"

Holly tried to ignore the centaur and concentrate on squeezing the shuttle through the shrinking gap.

Usually I pull this sort of stunt toward the end of an adventure, she thought. Third-act climax. We're starting early this time.

The shuttle grated along the tunnel floor, the friction sending up twin arcs of sparks that bounced off the walls. Holly slipped control goggles over her eyes and automatically adjusted her vision to the curious *double focus* necessary to send blink commands to the sensors in her lenses and actually look at what was in front of her.

"Close," she said. "It's going to be close." And then, before they lost the link: "Good luck, Foaly. Stay safe."

The centaur tapped his screen with two fingers. "Good luck to us all."

Holly bought them an extra few inches by deflating the *Cupid's* suspension pads, and the off-roader ducked under the descending blast doors with half a second to spare, swooping into the natural chimney. Below, the earth's core spewed up magma columns ten miles wide, creating fiery updrafts that blasted the small shuttle's scorched underside and set it spiraling toward the surface.

Holly set the stabilizers and allowed the headrest to cradle her neck and skull.

"Hold on," she said. "There's a rough ride ahead."

Pip jumped when the alarm sounded on his phone as though he had not been expecting it, as though he had not been counting the seconds. Nevertheless he seemed surprised, now that the moment had finally arrived. Shooting Kip had drained the cockiness from him, and his body language was clearly that of a reluctant assassin.

He tried to regain some of that old cavalier spirit by waving his gun a little and leering at the camera; but it is difficult to represent the murder of a childlike pixie as anything but that.

"I warned you," he said to the camera. "This is on you people, not me."

In Police Plaza, Commander Kelp activated the mike.

“I will find you,” he growled. “If it takes me a thousand years, I will find you and deliver you to a lifetime’s imprisonment.”

This actually seemed to cheer Pip a little. “You? Find me? Sorry if that doesn’t worry me, cop, but I know someone who scares me a lot more than you.”

And without further discussion he shot Opal, once, in the head.

The pixie toppled forward as though struck from behind with a shovel. The bullet’s impact drove her into the ground with some force, but there was very little blood except a small trickle from her ear, almost as if young Opal had fallen from her bicycle in the schoolyard.

In Police Plaza the usually riotous operations center grew quiet as the entire force waited for the repercussions of the murder they had just witnessed. Which quantum theory would prove correct? Perhaps nothing at all would happen apart from the death of a pixie.

“Okay,” said Trouble Kelp, after a long pregnant moment. “We’re still operational. How long before we’re out of the troll’s den?”

Foaly was about to run a few calculations on the computer when the wall screen spontaneously shattered, leaking green gas into the room.

“Hold on to something,” he advised. “Chaos is coming.”

Atlantis

Opal Koboï felt herself die, and it was a curious sensation, like an anxious gnawing at her insides.

So this is what trauma feels like, she thought. I’m sure I’ll get over it.

The sour sickness was soon replaced by a fizzing excitement as she relished the notion of what she was to become.

Finally I am transforming. Emerging from my chrysalis as the most powerful creature on the planet. Nothing will stand in my way.

This was all very melodramatic, but Opal decided that, under the circumstances, her eventual biographer would understand.

It never occurred to the pixie that her theory of temporal paradox could simply be dead wrong, and she could be left down a hole in a nuclear reactor having killed her only real ally.

I feel a tingle, she thought. It's beginning.

The tingle became an uncomfortable burning sensation in the base of her skull that quickly spread to clamp her entire head in a fiery vise. Opal could no longer nurture thoughts of future conquests as her entire being suddenly became fear and pain.

I have made a mistake, she thought desperately. No prize is worth another second of this.

Opal thrashed inside her anti-rad suit, fighting the soft constraints of the foam, which blunted her movements. The pain spread through her nervous system, increasing in intensity from merely unbearable to unimaginable. Whatever slender threads of sanity Opal had left snapped like a brig's moorings in a hurricane.

Opal felt her magic return to conquer the pain in what remained of her nerve endings. The mad and vengeful pixie fought to contain her own energy and not be destroyed utterly by her own power, even now being released as electrons shifted orbits and nuclei spontaneously split. Her body phase-shifted to pure golden energy, vaporizing the radiation suit and burning wormhole trails through the dissolving foam, ricocheting against the walls of the neutron chamber and back into Opal's ragged consciousness.

Now, she thought. Now the rapture begins, as I remake myself in my own image. I am my own god.

And, with only the power of her mind, Opal reassembled herself. Her appearance remained unchanged, for she was vain and believed herself to be perfect. But she opened and expanded her mind, allowing new powers to coat the bridges between her nerve cells, focusing on the ancient mantras of the dark arts so that her new magic could be used to bring her soldiers up from their resting place. Power like this was too much for one body, and she must excise it as soon as her escape was made, or her atoms would be shredded and swept away like windborne fireflies.

Nails are hard to reassemble, she thought. I might have to sacrifice my fingernails and toenails.

The ripple effects of young Opal's murder in the corner of a field were more widespread than even Artemis could have imagined, though in truth *imagine* is the wrong verb, as Artemis Fowl was not in the habit of imagining

anything. Even as a small boy, he had never nurtured daydreams of himself on horseback fighting dragons. What Artemis preferred to do was visualize an achievable objective and then work toward that goal.

His mother, Angeline, had once peered over eight-year-old Artemis's shoulder as he sketched in his journal.

Oh, darling, that's wonderful! she'd exclaimed, delighted that her boy had finally shown some interest in artistic creativity, even if the picture did seem a little violent. *It's a giant robot destroying a city.*

No, Mother, Artemis had sighed, ever the theatrical misunderstood genius. *It's a builder drone constructing a lunar habitat.*

Angeline had ruffled her son's hair in revenge for the sigh and wondered if little Arty might need to talk to someone professional.

Artemis had considered the widespread devastation that would be caused by the spontaneous energy exploding from all Opal-related material, but even he was not aware of the saturation levels Koboi products had achieved in the few years before her incarceration. Koboi Industries had many legitimate businesses, which manufactured everything from weapons parts to medical equipment; but Opal had also several shadow companies that illegally extended her influence to the human world and even into space, and the effects of these tens of thousands of components exploding ranged from inconvenient to downright catastrophic.

In the LEP lockup, two hundred assorted weapons, which were scheduled for recycling the following week, collapsed like melting chocolate bars, then radiated a fierce golden light that fried all local closed-circuit systems before exploding with the power of a hundred bars of Semtex. Fission was not achieved, but the damage was substantial nonetheless. The warehouse was essentially vaporized, and several of the underground city's load-bearing support pillars were toppled like children's building blocks.

Haven City Center collapsed inward, allowing a million tons of the earth's crust to cave in on top of the fairy capital, breaking the pressure seal and increasing the atmosphere readings by almost a thousand percent. Anything under the falling rock was squashed instantly. There were eighty-seven fatalities, and property damage was absolute.

Police Plaza's basement collapsed, causing the bottom three floors to sink into the depression. Fortunately the upper floors were bolted to the cavern roof, which held firm and saved the lives of many officers who had elected to remain at their posts.

Sixty-three percent of fairy automobiles had Koboï pistons in their engines, which blew simultaneously, causing an incredible synchronized flipping of vehicles, part of which was captured on a parking garage camera that had somehow survived compression. It would in future years become the most viewed clip on the Underworld Web.

Koboï shadow labs had for years been selling obsolete fairy technology to human companies, as it would seem cutting-edge to their shareholders. These little wonder chips or their descendants had wended their way into almost every computer-controlled device built within the past few years. These chips inside laptops, cell phones, televisions, and toasters popped and pinged like kinetically charged ball bearings in tin cans. Eighty percent of electronic communication on planet Earth immediately ceased. Humanity was heaved back to the paper age in half a second.

Life-support systems spat out bolts of energy and died. Precious manuscripts were lost. Banks collapsed as all financial records for the past fifty years were completely wiped out. Planes fell from the sky, the Graum II space station drifted off into space, and defense satellites that were not supposed to exist stopped existing.

People took to the streets, shouting into their dead cell phones as if volume could reactivate them. Looting spread across countries like a computer virus while actual computer viruses died with their hosts, and credit cards became mere rectangles of plastic. Parliaments were stormed worldwide as citizens blamed their governments for this series of inexplicable catastrophes.

Gouts of fire and foul blurts of actual brimstone emerged from cracks in the earth. These were mostly from ruptured pipes, but people took up a cry of Armageddon. Chaos reigned, and the survivalists eagerly unwrapped the kidskin from their crossbows.

Phase one of Opal's plan was complete.

CHAPTER 4

ENGINEER FOALY HAS THE LAST WORD

LUCKILY for Captain Holly Short and the passengers in the *Silver Cupid*, Foaly was so paranoid where Opal was concerned and so vain about his own inventions that he insisted nothing but branded Foaly-tech parts be used in the shuttle's refit, going so far as to strip out any Koboi or generic components that he could not trace back to a parent company. But, even with all of his paranoia, Foaly still missed a patch of filler on the rear fender that contained an adhesive *Killer Filler* developed by Koboi Labs. Fortunately, when the adhesive fizzled and blew, it took the path of least resistance and spun away from the ship like a fiery swarm of bees. No operating systems were affected—though there was an unsightly patch of primer left visible on the spoiler, which everyone in the shuttle would surely have agreed was preferable to their being dead.

The shuttle soared on the thermals, borne aloft like a dandelion seed in the Grand Canyon—if you accept that there are dandelions in the Grand Canyon in spite of the arid conditions. Holly nudged them into the center of the vast chimney, though there was little chance of their striking a wall in the absence of a full-fledged magma flare. Artemis called to her from the rear, but she could not hear over the roar of core wind.

“Cans,” she mouthed, tapping the phones in her own helmet. “Put on your headphones.”

He pulled a pair of bulky cans from their clip on the ceiling and adjusted them over his ears.

“Do you have any kind of preliminary damage report from Foaly?” he asked.

Holly checked her coms. “Nothing. Everything is down. I’m not even getting static.”

“Very well, here is the situation as I see it. As our communications are down, I assume that young Opal’s murder has thrown the entire planet into disarray. There will be mayhem on a scale not seen since the last world war. Our Opal doubtless plans to emerge from the ashes of this global pyre as some form of pixie phoenix. How she intends to do this, I do not know; but there is some connection to my home, the Fowl Estate, so that is where we must go. How long will the journey take, Holly?”

Holly considered what was under the hood. “I can shave fifteen minutes off the usual, but it’s still going to be a couple of hours.”

Two hours, thought Artemis. One hundred and twenty minutes to concoct a workable strategy wherein we three tackle whatever Opal has planned.

Butler adjusted his headphones’ microphone. “Artemis. I know this has occurred to you, because it occurred to me.”

“I predict, old friend,” said Artemis, “that you are about to point out that we are rushing headlong to the exact place where Opal is strongest.”

“Exactly, Artemis,” confirmed the bodyguard. “Or, as we used to say in the Delta: we are running blindfolded into the kill box.”

Artemis’s face fell. *Kill box?*

Holly shot Butler a withering glance. *Nicely put, big guy. Artemis’s family lives in that kill box.*

She flexed her fingers, then wrapped them tightly around the controls. “Maybe I can shave twenty minutes off the usual time,” she said, and set the shuttle’s sensors searching for the strongest thermals to bear them aloft toward whatever madness Opal Koboï had orchestrated for the world.

Atlantis

Opal took a few moments to congratulate herself on once again being absolutely correct in her theorizing and then lay absolutely still to see if she could feel the panic seeping through from above.

One does feel something, Opal concluded. Definitely a general wave of fear, with a dash of desolation.

It would have been nice to simply lie awhile and generate power; but with so much to do, that would have been an indulgence.

Work, work, work, she thought, turning her face to the tunnel mouth. I must away.

With barely a flick of her mind, Opal emitted a corona of intense light and heat, searing through the solidified anti-rad foam that encased her, and levitated to the tube hatch, which hindered her barely more than the foam. After all, she had the power now to change the molecular structure of whatever she concentrated on.

Already the power is fading, she realized. I am leaking magic, and my body will soon begin to disintegrate.

A dwarf stood in the chamber beyond the fizzled hatch, seeming most unperturbed by the wonders before him.

“This is Frondsday,” proclaimed Kolin Ozkopy, chin jutting. “I could be doing without all this bleeping nonsense on a Frondsday. First I lose reception on my phone so I have no idea who is winning the crunchball match, and now a golden pixie is floating in my chamber. So pray tell me, pixie lady, what is going on? And where are your nails?”

Opal was amazed to find that she felt compelled to answer. “Nails are difficult, dwarf. I was prepared to forgo nails to save time.”

“Yep, that makes a lot of sense,” said Ozkopy, displaying far too much lack of awe for Opal’s taste. “You want to know what’s difficult? Standing here getting blasted by your aura, that’s what. I should be covered in SPF one thousand.”

In fairness to Ozkopy, he was not being psychotically blasé about this whole affair. He was actually in shock and had a pretty good idea who Opal was and that he was probably about to die, and he was trying to brazen it out.

Opal’s golden brow creased with a frown like rippling lava. “You, dwarf, should be honored that the final image seared into your worthless retinas is one of my glorious...glory.”

Opal was not entirely happy with how that sentence had ended; but the dwarf would be dead momentarily, and the poor sentence construction forgotten. Ozkopy was not entirely happy with Opal insulting his retinas.

“Worthless retinas?!” he spluttered. “My dad gave me these retinas...not that he directly plucked ’em out of his own head, you understand, but he

passed 'em down.” To his eternal cosmic credit, Ozkopy decided to go out with some flair. “And, seeing as we’re insulting each other, I always thought you’d be taller. Plus, your hips are wobbly.”

Opal bristled angrily, which resulted in her radioactive corona expanding by a radius of three yards, totally atomizing anything within the sphere, including Kolin Ozkopy. But, even though the dwarf was gone, the sting of his parting comments would live on in Opal’s mind-drawer of unfinished business for the rest of her life. If Opal had one flaw that she would admit to, it was a tendency to rashly dispose of those who had offended her, letting them off the hook, as it were.

I mustn’t let that dwarf get me down, she told herself, ascending with blinding speed toward the surface. My hips are most definitely not wobbly.

Opal’s ascent was blinding and divine in appearance, like a supernova that shot toward the ocean’s surface, the fierce heat of her black magic repelling the walls of Atlantis and the crushing ocean with equal offhandedness, reorganizing the atomic structure of anything that stood in her way.

She rode her corona of black magic onward and upward toward the Fowl Estate. She did not need to think about her destination, as the lock called to her. The lock called, and she was the key.

CHAPTER 5

HARMA-GEDDON

Ériú, a.k.a. The Fowl Estate

Buried in a descending spiral around the lock, the Berserkers grew agitated as magic was let loose in the world above.

Something is coming, Oro, captain of the Berserkers, realized. Soon we will be free and our swords will taste human blood once more. We will bake their hearts in clay jars and call forth the ancient dark forces. We will infiltrate what forms we must to hold the humans back. They cannot kill us, for we are already dead, held together by a skein of magic.

Our time will be short. No more than a single night after all this time; but we will cover ourselves in glory and blood before we join Danu in the afterlife.

Can you feel the shift? Oro called down to the spirits of his warriors. *Be prepared to push forward when the gate is opened.*

We are ready, replied his warriors. *When the light falls upon us, we will seize the bodies of dogs, badgers, and humans and subvert them to our wills.*

Oro could not help thinking: I would rather inhabit a human than a badger.

For he was proud, and this pride had cost him his life ten thousand years ago.

Gobdaw, who lay to his left, sent out a shuddering thought that could almost be a chuckle.

Yes, he said. *But better a badger than a rat.*

If Oro's heart had been flesh and blood, it would have burst with a new pride, but this time for his warriors.

My soldiers are ready for war. They will fight until their stolen bodies drop, then finally be free to embrace the light.

Our time is at hand.

Juliet Butler was holding the fort, and not just in the sense of looking after things while Artemis's parents were away at an eco-conference in London—she was actually holding a fort.

The fort in question was an old Martello tower that stood sentry on a hill overlooking Dublin Bay. The fort had been worn down to a nub by the elements, and strange black ivy had thrown tendrils along the walls as though trying to reclaim the stone for the earth. The would-be conquerors were Artemis Fowl's brothers: four-year-old Myles and his twin, Beckett. The boys had rushed the tower several times with wooden swords but were rebuffed by Juliet and sent gently tumbling into the long grass. Beckett squealed with laughter, but Juliet could see that Myles was growing more and more frustrated at the failure of his assaults.

Just like Artemis, that one, Juliet thought. Another little criminal mastermind.

For the past ten minutes the boys had been rustling behind a bush, plotting their next attack. Juliet could hear muffled giggles and terse commands as Myles no doubt issued a complicated series of tactical instructions to Beckett.

Juliet smiled. She could just imagine the scenario.

Myles would say something like:

You go one way, Beck, and I go the other. 'S called flanking.

To which Beckett would respond with something like: *I like caterpillars.*

It was true to say that the brothers loved each other more than they loved themselves, but Myles lived in a state of constant frustration that Beckett could not, or would not, follow the simplest instruction.

Any second now Beckett will grow bored with this tactical meeting, thought Butler's younger sister, and come wandering from the bush brandishing his toy sword.

Moments later, Beckett did indeed stumble from the bush, but it was not a sword that he brandished.

Juliet swung her leg over the low parapet and called suspiciously.

“Beck, what have you got there?”

Beckett waved the item. “Underpants,” he said frankly.

Juliet looked again to confirm that the grubby triangle was indeed a pair of underpants. Because of the knee-length Wimpy Kid T-shirt he had worn for the past forty-eight days, it was impossible to ascertain whether or not the underpants were Beckett’s own, though it seemed likely, given that the boy’s legs were bare.

Beckett was something of an unruly character and, in her few months as nanny/bodyguard, Juliet had seen a lot worse things than underpants—for example, the worm farm that Beckett had constructed in the downstairs bathroom and fertilized *personally*.

“Okay, Beck,” she called down from the tower. “Just put the underpants down, kiddo. I’ll get you a clean pair.”

Beckett advanced steadily. “Nope. Beckett is sick of stupid underpants. These’re for you. A present.”

The boy’s face glowed with innocent enthusiasm, convinced that his Y-fronts were about the best present a girl could get—besides a pair of his Y-fronts with a handful of beetles cradled inside.

Juliet countered with: “But it’s not my birthday.”

Beckett was at the foot of the worn tower now, waving the pants like a flag. “I love you, Jules—take the present.”

He loves me, thought Juliet. Kids always know the weak spot.

She tried one last desperate ploy. “But won’t your bottom be chilly?”

Beckett had an answer for that. “Nope. I don’t ever feel cold.”

Juliet smiled fondly. It was easy to believe. Bony Beckett gave off enough heat to boil a lake. Hugging him was like hugging a restless radiator.

At this point, Juliet’s only way to avoid touching the underpants was a harmless lie. “Rabbits love old underpants, Beck. Why don’t you bury them as a gift for Papa Rabbit?”

“Rabbits don’t need underpants,” said a sinister little voice behind her. “They are warm-blooded mammals, and their fur is sufficient clothing in our climate.”

Juliet felt the tip of Myles’s wooden sword in her thigh and realized that

the boy had used Beckett as a distraction, then circled around to the back steps.

I didn't hear a thing, she mused. Myles is learning to creep.

"Very good, Myles," she said. "How did you get Beckett to follow your instructions?"

Myles grinned smugly, and the resemblance to Artemis was uncanny. "I didn't give him soldier's orders. I 'gested to Beck that his bum might be itchy."

This boy is not yet five, thought Juliet. Wait till the world gets a load of Myles Fowl.

From the corner of her eye she saw something triangular sail through the air toward her and instinctively snatched it. No sooner had her fingers closed on the material than it dawned on her what she was holding.

Great, she thought. Hoodwinked by two four-year-olds.

"Righto, boys," she said. "Time to go back to the house for lunch. What's on the menu today?"

Myles sheathed his sword. "I would like a croque madame, with chilled grape juice."

"Bugs," said Beckett, hopping on one foot. "Bugs in ketchup."

Juliet hiked Myles onto her shoulder and jumped down from the tower's low wall. "Same as yesterday, then, boys."

Memo to self, she thought. *Wash your hands.*

The boys were waist high in the pasture when the faraway chaos began. Beckett paid the sudden distant cacophony little attention as his internal soundtrack generally featured explosions and screaming, but Myles knew something was wrong.

He headed back to the Martello tower and clambered up the stone steps, displaying a lack of motor skills reminiscent of Artemis, which amused Beckett greatly, as he was sure-footed to the same extent his brothers were not.

"Armageddon," Myles announced when he reached the top step. "The end of the world."

Beckett was dismayed. "Not Disneyland too!"

Juliet ruffled his sun-bleached hair. “No, of course not Disneyland.” In her stomach she felt a growling of disquiet. Where were these noises coming from? It sounded as though there was a war zone nearby.

Juliet followed Myles to the compacted mud floor on top of the tower. From there they had a clear view down into the distant city. Usually the only sounds to ride the breeze this far north were the occasional beeps of traffic-jammed horns from cars stuck on the ring road. But today the highway to Dublin seemed more like the road to hell. Even from this distance, it was clear that the six lanes of traffic had come to a complete stop. Several engines exploded as they watched, and a pickup truck threw an unexpected forward flip. Farther into the city, bigger explosions rumbled from behind buildings and smoke belches drifted into the afternoon sky, a sky that had troubles of its own as a small aircraft landed in the center of a soccer stadium and an honest-to-God communications satellite dropped from space like a dead robot onto the roof of the U2 hotel.

Beckett climbed the steps and took Juliet’s hand.

“It is Harma-geddon,” he said quietly. “The world is going boom.”

Juliet pulled the boys close. Whatever was developing seemed too big to be directed specifically at the Fowl family, though there was a growing list of people who would happily destroy the entire county of Dublin just to get at Artemis.

“Don’t worry, boys,” she said. “I will protect you.”

She reached into her pocket. In situations like this where things were violently weird, the first course of action was always the same: *Call Artemis*.

She scrolled through the list of networks on her phone and was not overly surprised to see that the only available one was the FOX system that Artemis had set up for emergency secure calls.

I imagine that Artemis is the only teenager in the world to have built and launched his own satellite.

She was about to select Artemis’s name from her contacts when a bulky forearm appeared in space ten feet in front of her. There was a hand at the end of the arm, and it clutched a fairy Neutrino blaster.

“‘Nighty-’night, Mud Wench,” said a voice from nowhere, and a blue bolt of crackling power erupted from the tip of the weapon.

Juliet was familiar enough with fairy weapons to know that she would

survive a blue bolt, but that she would probably suffer a contact burn and wake up inside a cocoon of pain.

Sorry, my boys, she thought. I have failed you.

Then the bolt from Pip's weapon hit her in the chest, scorched her jacket, and knocked her from the tower.

Oro of the Berserkers felt a moment of doubt.

Perhaps this anticipation of freedom is merely a yearning, he thought.

No. This was more than his own longing. The key was coming. He could feel the rush of power as it approached their tomb.

Gather yourselves, he sent down to his warriors. When the gate is open, take whatever shape you must. Anything that lives or has lived can be ours.

Oro felt the earth shake with the roar of his warriors.

Or perhaps that was mere yearning.

CHAPTER 6

RISE, MY BEAUTIES

Tara Shuttleport, Ireland

When Captain Holly Short attempted to dock in her assigned shuttle bay, she found Tara's electromagnetic clamps to be inoperable and so was forced to improvise a landing in the gate's access tunnel. This was more or less what the Tara shuttleport supervisor would write in his *Extraordinary Incident* report when he got out of rehab, but the sentence did not convey the sheer trauma of the situation.

For their entire approach, Holly's instruments had assured her that everything was hunky-dory; and then, just as she swung the *Silver Cupid's* tail around to dock with the clamps, Tara's flight-control computer had made a noise like raw meat hitting a wall at speed, then shut itself down, leaving Holly with no choice but to reverse into the shuttleport's access tunnel and pray that there were no unauthorized personnel in there.

Metal crumpled, Plexiglas shattered, and fiber-optic cables stretched like warm toffee and snapped. The *Silver Cupid's* reinforced hide took the punishment, but the hood ornament flew off like its namesake and would be found three months later in the belly of a soda machine, corroded to a barely recognizable stick figure.

Holly hauled on the brake as sparks and shards rained down, pockmarking the windshield. Her pilot's gyro harness had absorbed most of the shock meant for her body, but Artemis and Butler had been tossed around like beads in a rattle.

"Everybody alive?" she called over her shoulder, and the assortment of groans that wafted back confirmed her passengers' survival, if not their *intact* survival.

Artemis crawled out from under Butler's protective huddle and checked the shuttle's readings. Blood dripped from a slit on the youth's brow, but he appeared not to notice.

"You need to find a way out, Holly."

Holly almost giggled. Driving the *Cupid* out of here would mean willfully destroying an entire LEP installation. She would not just be tearing up the rulebook; she would be shredding the pages, then mixing them with troll dung, baking the concoction, and tossing the biscuits on a campfire.

"Dung biscuits," she muttered, which made no sense if you didn't know her train of thought.

"You may be making *dung biscuits* of the rulebook," said Artemis, who could apparently track trains of thought, "but Opal must be stopped for all our sakes."

Holly hesitated.

Artemis capitalized on her hesitation. "Holly. These are *extraordinary circumstances*," he said urgently. "Do you remember Butler's phrase? *Kill box*. That's where my brothers are at this moment. In the kill box. And you know how much Juliet will sacrifice to save them."

Butler leaned forward, grasping a hanging hand-grip loop and pulling it from its housing in the process.

"Think tactically," he said, instinctively knowing how to galvanize the fairy captain. "We need to proceed under the assumption that we are the only small force standing between Opal and whatever form of world domination her twisted mind has cooked up in solitary. And remember, she was prepared to sacrifice herself. She *planned* for it. We need to go. *Now, soldier!*"

Butler was right, and Holly knew it.

"Okay," she said, punching parameters into the *Cupid's* route finder. "You asked for it."

A sprite in a hi-vis jacket was flying down the access tunnel, wings tapping the curved walls in his haste. Sprite wing tips were sensitive bio-sonar sensors that took decades to heal, so the sprite must have been in some considerable distress for such reckless flight.

Holly moaned. "It's Nander Thall. Mister By-the-Book."

Thall was paranoid that the humans would somehow contaminate Haven

on the way in, or steal something on the way out, so he insisted on full scans every time the *Cupid* docked.

“Just go,” Butler urged. “We don’t have time for Thall’s regulations.”

Nander Thall hollered at them through a megaphone. “Power down, Captain Short. What in Frond’s name do you think you are doing? I knew you were a wild card, Short. I knew it. Unstable.”

“No time,” said Artemis. “No time.”

Thall hovered two feet from the windshield. “I’m a-looking in your eyeball, Short, and I see chaos. We’re in lockdown here. The shield has failed, do you understand that? All it would take is some Mud Man with a shovel to unearth the entire shuttleport. It’s all hands to the fortifications, Short. Power down. I’m giving you a direct order.”

Nander Thall’s eyes bulged in their sockets like goose eggs, and his wings beat erratically. This was a sprite on the edge.

“Do you think if we ask for permission, he will let us go in time?” said Artemis.

Holly doubted it. The access tunnel stretched out behind Thall, passengers huddled nervously in the pools of light cast by emergency beacons. The situation would be difficult enough to contain without her driving up the panic levels.

The onboard computer beeped, displaying the optimum escape route on the screen, and it was this beep that spurred Holly.

“Sorry,” she mouthed at Nander Thall. “Gotta go.”

Thall’s wings beat with nervous rapidity. “Don’t you mouth *Sorry* at me! And you do not *gotta go* anywhere.”

But Holly *was* sorry and she did *gotta go*. So she went. Straight up toward the luggage conveyor, which generally trundled overhead, luggage floating along on a transparent smart-water canal that displayed the identity of the owner through the Plexiglas. Now the conveyor canal was stagnant, and the suitcases bumped each other like abandoned skiffs.

Holly nudged the joystick with one thumb, settling the *Cupid* into the canal, which the computer assured her was wide enough to accommodate the vehicle. It was, with barely an inch to spare on each side of the wheel arches.

Incredibly, Nander Thall was in pursuit. He bobbed alongside the canal,

his comb-over blown back like a windsock, shouting into his little megaphone.

Holly shrugged theatrically. “Can’t hear you,” she mouthed. “Sorry.”

And she left the sprite swearing at the baggage tunnel, which flowed in gentle sloped circles toward the Arrivals hall.

Holly piloted the *Cupid* along the tunnel’s curves, guided by twin headlights that revealed Plexiglas walls embedded with miles of dead circuitry. Dim shapes could be seen beavering at circuit boxes, stripping out smoking capacitors and fuses.

“Dwarfs,” said Holly. “They make the best electricians. No lighting required, and small dark spaces a bonus. Plus, they eat the dead components.”

“Seriously?” wondered Butler.

“Absolutely. Mulch assures me that copper is very cleansing.”

Artemis did not involve himself in the conversation. It was trivial, and he was deep in visualization mode, picturing every conceivable scenario that would face them when they reached Fowl Manor, and plotting how to emerge from these scenarios as the victor.

In this respect, Artemis’s methodology was similar to that of American chess master Bobby Fischer, who was capable of computing every possible move an opponent could make so that he could counteract it. The only problem with this technique was that there were some scenarios that Artemis simply could not face, and these had to be shuffled to the end of his process, rendering it flawed.

And so he plotted, realizing that it was probably futile, as he did not know most of the constants in this equation, not to mention the variables.

A dark promise drifted below the surface of his logic.

If my loved ones are harmed, then Opal Koboï shall pay.

Artemis tried to banish the thought as it served no useful purpose; but the notion of revenge refused to go away.

Holly had only a few hundred pilot hours logged in the *Cupid*, far too little for what she was attempting. But then again, there weren’t enough pilot hours in a lifetime for this kind of driving.

The *Cupid* sped along the canal, its chunky tires finding purchase in the

Plexiglas trough, the tiny rocket disguised as an exhaust pipe boiling a short-lived wake in the smart-water. Suitcases were crushed under its treads or popped like mortars along the belt's scoop, showering those below with fluttering garments, cosmetics, and smuggled human memorabilia. The security guards on duty had had the presence of mind to confiscate most of these artifacts, but nobody ever figured out who had managed to stuff a life-sized Gandalf cardboard cutout into a suitcase.

Holly drove on, concentrating through squinted eyes and gritted teeth. The luggage canal took them out of the terminal into bedrock. Upward they spiraled through archaeological strata, past dinosaur bones and Celtic tombs, through Viking settlements and Norman walls, until the *Cupid* emerged in a large baggage hall with a transparent roof that opened directly to the elements—a real James Bond supervillain-lair kind of place, complete with spidery metallic building struts and a shuttle rail system.

Generally, the Sky Window would be camouflaged using projectors and shields; but these security measures were out of commission until all Koboï parts could be replaced with technology that hadn't exploded. On this afternoon, bruised Irish rainclouds drifted across the beveled panes, and the baggage hall would be completely visible from above if anyone cared to photograph the fairy baggage handlers or forklift trucks that stood with smoking holes in their bodywork, as though the victims of a sniper.

Holly asked the computer whether there was another way out besides the one it was suggesting. The onboard avatar informed her dispassionately that indeed there was, but it was three hundred miles away.

"D'Arvit," muttered Holly, deciding that she wasn't going to worry about rules anymore, or property damage. There was a bigger picture to consider here, and nobody likes a whiner.

Nobody likes a whiner. Her father had always said that.

She could see him now, spending every free minute in his precious garden, feeding algae to his tubers under the sim-sunlight.

You have to do your share of the housework, Poppy. Your mother and I work long hours to keep this family going. He would stop then and stroke her chin. *The Berserkers made the ultimate sacrifice for the People long ago. Nobody's asking you to go that far, but you could do your chores with a smile on your pretty face.* He would stiffen then, playing at sergeant major. *So hop to it, Soldier Poppy. Nobody likes a whiner.*

Holly caught sight of her reflection in the windshield. Her eyes brimmed with melancholy. Daughters had always carried the nickname *Poppy* in her family. No one could remember why.

“Holly,” barked Artemis. “Security is closing in.”

Holly jerked guiltily and checked the perimeter. Several security guards were edging toward the *Cupid*, trying to bluff her with useless Neutrino handguns, using the smoking hulk of a flipped shuttle for cover.

One of the guards snapped off a couple of shots, dinging the front fender.

A custom weapon, Holly realized. He must have built it himself.

The shots had little effect on the *Cupid*'s plates. But if the guard had gone to the trouble of cobbling together his own backup pistol, perhaps he had thought to bolt on an armor-piercing barrel.

As if reading her mind, the guard fumbled at his belt for a clip of ammunition.

That's the difference between me and you, thought Holly. I don't fumble.

She switched all power to the jets and sent the *Cupid* rocketing toward the Sky Window, leaving the security guards pretending to fire useless weapons at her, a couple even going so far as to make *bang bang* noises, though fairy weapons hadn't gone *bang bang* in centuries.

The Sky Window is reinforced Plexiglas, thought Holly. Either it breaks, or the *Cupid* does. Probably a bit of both.

Though she would never know it, Holly's gamble would not have paid off. The Sky Window was built to withstand direct impact from anything short of a low-yield nuclear warhead, a fact that was proudly announced over the terminal's speakers a hundred times a day, which Holly had somehow managed to avoid hearing.

Luckily for Captain Short and her passengers—and indeed the fate of much of the wider world—her potentially fatal ignorance would never come to light, as Foaly had anticipated a situation where a fairy craft would be heading at full speed for the Sky Window and it would refuse to open. The centaur had also guessed that, because of the universal law of maximum doo-doo displacement—which states that when the aforementioned doo-doo hits the fan, the fan will be in your hand and pointed at someone important who

can have you fired—the Sky Window would probably refuse to open at a crucial time. And so he had come up with a little proximity organism that ran on its own bio-battery/heart, which he had grown from the stem cells of *appropriated* sprite wings.

The whole process was dubious at best and illegal at worst, and so Foaly hadn't bothered to log a blueprint and simply had the sensors installed on his say-so. The result was that a cluster of these proximity beetles scuttled along the Sky Window pane edges, and if their little antennae sensed a vehicle drawing too close to a certain pane, they excreted a spray of acid on the window and then quickly ate the pane. The energy required to complete their task in time was massive, and so when the beetles were finished, they curled up and died. It was impressive; but, pretty much like the man with the exploding head, it was a onetime trick.

When the beetles sensed the *Cupid's* ascent, they rushed into action like a minute company of cavalry and devoured the pane in less than four seconds. When their job was done, they winked out and dropped like ball bearings onto the vehicle's hood.

“That was easy,” Holly said into her microphone, as the *Cupid* passed through a *Cupid*-shaped hole. “So much for Foaly's great Sky Window.”

Ignorance, as they say, is usually fatal, but sometimes it can be bliss.

Holly powered up the *Cupid's* shield—though with every single human satellite out of commission she really needn't have bothered—and set a course for Fowl Manor.

Which gives us about five minutes before Opal has us exactly where she wants us.

A less-than-comforting thought, which she did not voice—but all it took was a glance in the rearview mirror at Butler's expression to see that the bodyguard was thinking more or less the same thing.

“I know,” he said, catching her eye. “But what choice do we have?”

Irish Airspace

Opal could not have turned her face from the lock now if she had put all her enhanced pixie might to the task. She was the key, and the two were paired. Their collision was as inevitable as the passage of time. Opal felt the skin on

her face stretch toward the lock, and her arms were pulled until the sockets creaked.

The elfin warlock was indeed powerful, she thought. Even after all this time, his magic holds.

Her trajectory took her in a regular arc to the Atlantic's surface and across the afternoon sky to Ireland. She descended like a fireball in a slingshot toward the Fowl Estate, with no time to wonder or worry about—or, for that matter, revel in—the imminent proof of her theories.

I will raise the dead, she had often thought in her cell. Even Foaly cannot make that boast.

Opal hit the Fowl Estate like a comet come to Earth, directly on the worn nub of the Martello tower, with its alien creeping vine. Like a dog snuffling after a bone, her corona of magic destroyed the tower and cleared a crater for itself, spiraling twenty feet down, past centuries of deposit, revealing another more ancient tower below. The magic sniffed out the roof lock, settling over it like a shimmering man-o'-war.

Opal lay facedown, floating, dreamily watching events unfold. She saw her fingers splay and twitch, spark-streams shooting from the tips. She saw the cloaking spell stripped from what had seemed to be a simple metamorphous boulder, revealing it to be a rough stone tower with complicated intertwined runes etched into its surface. The magical ectoplasm sank into the engraved runes, electrifying them, sending burning rivulets coursing through the grooves.

Open yourself to me, thought Opal, though this is an interpretation of her brain patterns. Another interpretation would be *Aaaaaaargghhhhh*.

The lock's runes teemed with magic, becoming animated, slithering like snakes on hot sands, nipping at each other, fat ones swallowing the lines of lesser magic until all that remained was a simple couplet in Gnommish:

*Here be the lock first of two
See it open and live to rue*

Opal had enough consciousness left to smirk inside her cocoon. *Fairy medieval poetry. Typically blunt. Bad grammar, obvious rhyme, and*

melodrama coming out its metaphorical ears.

I shall see it open, she thought. And Artemis Fowl will live to rue. But not for long.

Opal gathered herself and placed her right hand flat on the stone, fingers splayed, magic clouding the tips. The hand sank in like sunlight through the darkness, cracks radiating from the contact.

Rise, she thought. Rise, my beautiful warriors.

The Berserkers were expelled from holy ground and into the air as though shot from cannon. The afterlife's tug lessened, and the warriors felt free to complete their mission. The next death, they knew, would be their last, and finally the gates to Nimh would be open to them. This had been promised; they longed for it. For it is ever true that, though the dead long for life, souls are made for heaven and will not rest until they reach it. This was something unknown to the elfin warlock when he had forged the lock and key. He did not know that he had doomed his warriors to ten thousand years with their faces turned from the light. And to turn from the light for too long could cost a person his soul.

But now, all the promises that had been whispered into their dying ears as the priests lugged their limp, heavy bodies to the trench were on the verge of fulfillment. All they needed to do was defend the gate in their stolen bodies, and their next death would open the gates of paradise. The Berserkers could go home.

But not before human blood was spilled.

The soil fizzled and danced as the ectoplasm of a hundred fairy warriors burst through it. Upward they surged, impatient for the light. They were drawn inexorably toward the key who lay over the stone lock, and they passed through the conduit of her magic one by one.

Oro was first.

It is a pixie, he realized with no little surprise, as pixies were known for their lack of magical ability. And a female! But, for all that, this one's magic was powerful.

As each successive warrior flashed through Opal's being, she felt their pain and despair and absorbed their experiences before expelling them into the

world with one command.

Obey me. You are my soldier now.

And so were Oro and his band of Berserkers placed under *geasa*, or fairy bond, to follow Opal wherever she would command. They tumbled into the sky, searching for a body to inhabit inside the magic circle.

As leader, Oro had first choice of available ciphers, and he had, like many of his warriors, spent many thousands of hours considering what creature would make the ideal host for his talents. Ideally he would choose an elf with a bit of muscle to him and a long arm for swordplay; but it was unlikely that such a fine specimen would be readily available, and even if it were, it would be such a shame to take one elf and replace him with another. Recently, Oro had settled on a troll as his vehicle of choice, if there should happen to be one lumbering around.

Imagine it. A troll with an elf's mind. What a formidable warrior that would make!

But there were no trolls, and the only available fairy was a feeble gnome with protection runes crisscrossing his chest. No possessing that one.

There were humans, three of the hated creatures. Two males and a female. He would leave the female for Bellico, one of only two she-fairies in their ranks. So that left the boys.

Oro's soul circled above the males. Two curious little man-eens, who were not displaying the awe that this situation would seem to call for. Their world had dissolved to a maelstrom of magic, for Danu's sake. Should they not be quaking in their boots, bubbling from the nose, and begging for a mercy that would not be forthcoming?

But no, their reactions were surprising. The dark-haired boy had moved swiftly to the fallen girl and was expertly checking her pulse. The second, a blond one, had uprooted a clump of reeds with surprising strength for one his size, and he was even now accosting the doltish gnome, forcing him backward toward a ditch.

That one interests me, thought Oro. He is young and small, but his body fizzes with power. I will have him.

And it was as simple as that. Oro thought it, and so it became deed. One second he was hovering above Beckett Fowl, and the next he had become him and was beating the gnome with a fistful of whippety reeds.

Oro laughed aloud at the senses assaulting his nerve endings. He felt the sweat in the wrinkles of his fingers, the glistening smoothness of the reeds. He smelled the boy, the youth and energy of him, like hay and summer. He felt a youthful heart beat like a drum in his chest.

“Ha!” he said exultantly, and he continued to thrash the gnome for the sheer fun of it, thinking: The sun is warm, praise be Belenos. I live once more, but I will die gladly this day to see humans in the ground beside me.

For it is ever true that resurrected fairy warriors are supernoble in their thought patterns and don’t have much in the way of a sense of humor.

“Enough of this playfulness,” he said in Gnommish, and his human tongue mangled the words so that he sounded like an animal grunting speech. “We must assemble.”

Oro looked to the skies, where his plasmic warriors sloshed about him like a host of translucent deep-sea creatures. “This is what we have waited for,” he called. “Find a body inside the circle.”

And they dispersed in a flash of ozone, scouring the Fowl Estate for vessels that would become their hosts.

The first bodies to be taken were the humans who were nearby.

It was a poor day to hunt for ciphers on the Fowl Estate. On an average weekday the manor would have been a virtual throng of humanity. And presiding over everything would be Artemis Senior and Angeline Fowl, master and mistress of the manor. But on this fateful day the manor was virtually shut down for the approaching Christmas holidays. Artemis’s parents were in London, attending an eco-conference, with one personal assistant and two maids in tow. The rest of the staff was on early leave, with only the occasional holiday visit to keep the manor ticking. The Fowl parents had planned to scoop up their offspring on the tarmac at Dublin Airport once Artemis had concluded his therapy, and then point the Green Jet’s composite nose cone toward Cap Ferrat for Christmas on the Côte d’Azur.

Today, nobody was home except for Juliet and her charges. Not a nugget of humanity left to be preyed on, much to the frustration of the circling souls who had been dreaming of this moment for a very long time. So choices were limited to various wildlife, including eight crows, two deer, a badger, a couple of English pointer hunting dogs that Artemis Senior kept

in the stables, and corpses with a bit of spark in them, which were more plentiful than you might think. Corpses were far from ideal hosts, as decay and desiccation made quick thinking and fine motor movements tricky. Also, bits were liable to fall off when you needed them most.

The first corpses to go were fairly well preserved for their ages. Artemis Senior had, in his gangster days, stolen a collection of Chinese warrior mummies, which he had yet to find a safe way to repatriate and so stored in a dry-lined secret basement. The warriors were more than surprised to find their brain matter reanimated and rehydrated, and their consciousnesses being ridden shotgun by warriors even older than they were. They clanged into action in rusty armor and smashed through the glass in mounted display cases to reclaim their swords and polearm spears, steel tips polished to a deadly glitter by a loving curator. The basement door splintered quickly under their assault, and the mummies crashed through the manor's great hall into the sunlight, pausing for a moment to feel its warm touch on their upturned brows before lumbering toward the pasture and their leader, forcing themselves to hurry in spite of their awakening senses, which longed to stop and smell any plant life. Even the compost heap.

The next corpses to be reanimated were those of a bunch of rowdy lads interred by a cave-in, in a cave, back in the eighteenth century, while burying a plundered galleon's worth of treasure, which they had transferred from the breached hull of HMS *Octagon* to their own brigantine, *The Cutlass*. The feared pirate Captain Eusebius Fowl and ten of his only slightly less feared crew were not crushed by the falling rock but sealed in an airtight bubble that would admit not so much as a sparrow's whistle for them to suck into their lungs.

The pirates' bodies jittered as though electrocuted, shrugged off their blankets of kelp, and squeezed through a recently eroded hole in their tomb wall, heedless of the popped joints and sprung ribs that the journey cost.

Aside from these groups, there were sundry corpses who found themselves dragged from their resting places to become accomplices in Opal Koboi's latest bid for power. The spirit had already moved on from some, but for those who had died violently or with unfinished business, a ghost of their very essence remained, which could do nothing but lament the rough treatment heaped upon their bodies by the Berserkers.

Opal Koboï slumped on the ancient rock, and the runes that had slithered like fiery snakes settled once more, congregating around Opal's handprint in the center of the magical key.

The first lock has been opened, she thought, her senses returning in nauseating waves. Only I can close it now.

The gnome heretofore referred to as Pip, but whose actual name was the considerably more unwieldy Gotter Dammerung, hobbled into the crater, climbed the ancient tower steps, and wrapped a glittering shawl around Opal's shoulders.

"Star cloak, Miss Opal," he said. "As requested."

Opal stroked the material and was pleased. She found that there was still enough magic in her fingertips to calculate the thread count.

"Well done, Gunter."

"That's Gotter, Miss Koboï," corrected the gnome, forgetting himself.

Opal's stroking fingers froze, then gripped a handful of the silken cloak so tightly that it smoked. "Yes, Gotter. You shot my younger self?"

Gotter straightened. "Yes, miss, as ordered. Gave her a nice burial, like you said in the code."

It occurred to Opal that this fairy would be a constant reminder that she had sacrificed her younger self for power.

"It is true that I ordered you to kill Opal the younger, but she was terrified, *Gotter*. I felt it."

Gotter was perplexed. This day was not turning out at all as the gnome had imagined. He'd nurtured images of painted elfin warriors, their bone-spiked braids streaming behind them, but instead he was surrounded by human children and agitated wildlife.

"I don't like those rabbits," he blurted, possibly the most monumentally misjudged non sequitur of his life. "They look weird. Look at their vibrating ears."

Opal did not feel that a person of her importance should have to deal with comments like these, and so she vaporized poor Gotter with a bolt of plasmic power, leaving nothing of the loyal gnome but a smear of blackish burn paste on the step. A poorly judged use of plasma as it turned out, because Opal certainly could have used a moment to fully charge up a second

bolt to deal with the armored shuttle that suddenly appeared over the boundary wall. It was shielded, true; but Opal had enough dark magic in her to see to the heart of the shimmer before her. She reacted a little hastily and sent a weak bolt careering to the left, managing only to clip the engine housing and not engulf the entire craft. The errant magic flew wild, knocking a turret from the estate wall before collapsing into squibs that whizzed skyward.

Though the *Cupid* was merely clipped, the contact was sufficient to melt its rocket engine, disable its weapons, and send it into an earthbound nosedive that even the most skillful pilot would not have been able to soften.

More avatars for my soldiers, thought Opal, pulling the star cloak tight around her and skipping nimbly down the tower steps. She climbed the crater wall and followed the furrow plowed through the meadow by the mortally wounded shuttle. Her warriors were close behind, still half drunk on new sensations, tottering in their new bodies, trying to form words in unfamiliar throats.

Opal glanced overhead and saw three souls streaking toward the smoking craft, which had come to an awkward rest crammed into the lee of a boundary wall.

“Take them,” she called to the Berserkers. “My gift to you.”

Almost all of the Berserkers had been accommodated by this point and were stretching tendons with great relish, or scratching the earth beneath their paws, or sniffing at the evening musk. All were catered to except three laggardly souls who had resigned themselves to a resurrection spent cramped and embarrassed inside the bodies of ducklings, when these new hosts arrived inside the circle.

Two humans and a fairy. The Berserkers’ spirits lifted. Literally.

Inside the *Cupid*, it was Holly who’d fared best from the crash, though she had been closest to the impact. *Faring best*, however, is a relative term, and probably not the one Holly would have chosen to describe her condition.

I fared best, she would probably fail to say at the earliest opportunity. *I only had a punctured lung and a snapped collarbone. You should have seen the other guys.*

Luckily for Holly, absent friends once again contributed to her not being dead. Just as Foaly's Sky Window bio-sensors had prevented a calamitous collision in the shuttleport, her close friend the warlock N^o1 had saved her with his own special brand of demon magic.

And how had he done this? It had happened two days previously over their weekly sim-coffee in Stirbox, a trendy java joint in the Jazz Quarter. N^o1 had been even more hyper than usual, due to the double-shot espresso that was coursing through his squat gray body. The runes that embossed his frame's armor plating glowed with excess energy.

"I'm not supposed to have sim-coffee," he confessed. "Qwan says it disturbs my chi." The little demon winked, momentarily concealing one orange eye. "I could have told him that demons don't have chi, we have *qwa*, but I don't think he's ready for that yet."

Qwan was N^o1's magical master, and so fond was the little demon of his teacher that he pretended not to have surpassed him years ago.

"And coffee is great for *qwa*. Makes it zing right along. I could probably turn a giraffe into a toad now if I felt like it. Though there would be a lot of excess skin left over. Mostly neck skin."

"That is a disturbing idea," said Holly. "If you want to perform some useful amphibian-related magic, why don't you do something about the swear toads?"

Swear toads were the result of a college prank during which a group of postgrads had managed to imbue a strain of toads with the power of speech. Bad language only. This had been hilarious for about five minutes, until the toads began multiplying at a ferocious rate and spouting foul epithets at anything that moved, including kindergarten fairies and people's grandmothers.

N^o1 laughed softly. "I like swear toads," he said. "I have two at home called Bleep and D'Arvit. They are very rude to me, but I know they don't mean it." The little demon took another slurp of coffee. "So, let's talk about your magic problem, Holly."

"What magic problem?" asked Holly, genuinely puzzled.

"I see magic like another color in the spectrum, and you are leaking magic like swamp cheese leaks stink."

Holly looked at her own hands, as though the evidence would be visible.

“I am?”

“Your skeleton is the battery that stores your magic, but yours has been abused one time too many. How many healings have you undergone? How many traumas?”

“One or two,” admitted Holly, meaning *nine or ten*.

“One or two *this cycle*,” scoffed N°1. “Don’t lie to me, Holly Short. Your electro-dermal activity has increased significantly. That means your fingertips are sweating. I can see that too.” The little gray demon shuddered. “Actually, sometimes I see stuff that I have no desire to see. A sprite came into my office the other day, and he had a bunch of microscopic hoop-worm larvae wriggling around his armpit. What is wrong with people?”

Holly didn’t answer. It was best to let N°1 rant stuff out of his system.

“And I see you’ve been donating a spark or two of your magic every week to the Opal clone in Argon’s clinic, trying to make it a little more comfortable. You’re wasting your time, Holly. That creature doesn’t have a spirit; magic is no use.”

“You’re wrong, N°1,” said Holly quietly. “Nopal is a person.”

N°1 held out his rough palms. “Give me your hands,” he said.

Holly placed her fingers in his. “Are we going to sing a sea shanty?”

“No,” replied N°1. “But this might hurt a little.”

This might hurt a little is universal code for *this will definitely hurt a lot*, but before Holly’s brain could translate this, N°1’s forehead rune spiraled—something it only did when he was building up to some major power displacement. She managed to blurt, “Wait a—” before what felt like two electric eels wrapped themselves around her arms, slithering upward, sinking into her chest. It was not a pleasant experience.

Holly lost control of her limbs, spasming like a marionette on the end of a giggling puppet master’s strings. The entire episode lasted no more than five seconds, but five seconds of acute discomfort can seem like a long time.

Holly coughed smoke and spoke once her jaw stopped clicking. “You had to do that in a coffee shop, I suppose?”

“I thought we wouldn’t see each other for a while, and I worry about you. You’re so reckless, Holly. So eager to help anyone but yourself.”

Holly flexed her fingers, and it was as though her joints had been oiled.

“Wow, I feel great now that the blinding pain has faded.” Suddenly the rest of N^o1’s words registered. “And why wouldn’t we see each other for a while?”

N^o1 looked suddenly serious. “I’ve accepted an invitation to the Moon Station. They want me to have a look at some microorganisms and see if I can extract some race memory from their cells.”

“Uh-huh,” said Holly, understanding all of the first sentence but nothing of the second beyond the individual words. “How long will you be gone?”

“Two of your Earth years.”

“Two years,” stammered Holly. “Come on, N^o1. You’re my last single fairy friend. Foaly got hitched. Trouble Kelp is hooked up with Lily Frond, though what he sees in that airhead is beyond me.”

“She’s pretty and she cares about him, but besides that I have no idea,” said N^o1 archly.

“He’ll find out what Frond is really like when she ditches him for someone more senior.”

N^o1 thought it politic not to mention Holly’s three disastrous dates with Commander Kelp, the last of which ended with them both being thrown out of a crunchball match.

“There’s always Artemis.”

Holly nodded. “Yeah. Artemis is a good guy, I suppose; but whenever we meet, it ends in shots fired, or time travel, or brain cells dying. I want a quiet friend, N^o1. Like you.”

N^o1 took her hand again. “Two years will fly by. Maybe you can get a lunar pass and come to visit me.”

“Maybe. Now, enough changing the subject. What did you just do to me?”

N^o1 cleared his throat. “Well, I gave you a magical makeover. Your bones are less brittle, your joints are lubed. I bolstered your immune system, and cleared out your synapses, which were getting a little clogged with magical residue. I filled your tank with my own personal blend of power, and made your hair a little more lustrous than it already is, and bolstered your protection rune so you will never be possessed again. I want you to be safe and well until I come back.”

Holly squeezed her friend's fingers. "Don't worry about me. Routine operations only."

Routine operations only, thought Holly now, groggy from the impact and also the magic coursing through her system, repairing her fractured collarbone and knitting the lattice of slices in her skin.

The magic would have liked to shut her down for repairs, but Holly could not allow that. She pawed the first aid pack from its niche on her belt and slapped an adrenaline patch onto her wrist, the hundreds of tiny needles releasing the chemical into her bloodstream. An adrenaline shot would keep her alert while allowing the magic to do its work. The *Cupid's* cab was smashed, and only the vehicle's toughened exoskeleton had prevented a total collapse that would have crushed the passengers. As it was, the shuttle had ridden its last magma flare. In the back of the vehicle, Butler was shrugging off the concussion that was threatening to drag him to oblivion, and Artemis lay wedged into the floor space between seats like a discarded action figure.

I like you, Artemis, Holly thought. But I need Butler.

And so Butler got the first shot of healing magic, a bolt that hit the bodyguard like a charged defibrillator, sending him spasming through the back window to the meadow beyond.

Wow, thought Holly. Nice brew, N^o1.

She was more careful with Artemis, flicking a drop of magic from her fingertip onto the middle of his forehead. Still, the contact was enough to set his skin rippling like pond water.

Something was coming. Holly could see the doubly distorted images through the shattered windows and her cracked visor. A lot of somethings. They looked small but moved surely.

I don't get it. I am not getting it yet.

N^o1's magic completed its healing journey through her system, and, as the blood cleared from her left eye, Holly got a good look at what was coming her way.

A menagerie, she thought. Butler can handle it.

But then N^o1's magic allowed her a flickering glimpse of the souls floating like tattered translucent kites in the air, and she remembered the stories her father had told her so many times.

The bravest of the brave. Left behind to protect the gate.

Berserkers, Holly realized. The legend is true. If they take Butler, we are finished.

She crawled over Artemis through the back window, and rolled into the trough carved out by the *Cupid's* crash, freshly scythed earth crumbling over her head. For a moment Holly had the irrational fear that she was being buried alive, but then the tumbling earth rattled past her limbs and she was clear.

Holly felt the throbbing afterpain of a healed break in her shoulder, but otherwise she was physically fine.

My vision is still blurred, she realized. Why?

But it was not her vision, it was the helmet's lenses, which were cracked.

Holly raised her visor and was greeted by the crystal-clear sight of an attacking force being led by Artemis's little brothers, which seemed to include a phalanx of ancient, armored warriors, and various woodland animals.

Butler was on all fours beside her, shaking off the magic fugue like a grizzly bear shaking off river water. Holly found another adrenaline patch in her pack and slapped it onto his exposed neck.

Sorry, old friend. I need you operational.

Butler jumped to his feet as though electrified, but swayed, disoriented, for a moment.

The assortment of possessed figures halted suddenly, arranged in a semicircle—obviously itching to attack but held at bay for some reason.

Little Beckett Fowl was at the forefront of the motley group, but he seemed less a child now, carrying himself as he did with a warrior's swagger, a fistful of bloody reeds swinging in his grip. The vestiges of N⁰1's magic allowed Holly to glimpse the spirit of Oro lurking inside the boy.

"I am a fairy," she called in Gnommish. "These humans are my prisoners. You have no quarrel with us."

Opal Kobi's voice drifted over the ranks. "Prisoners? The big one doesn't appear to be a prisoner."

"Kobi," said Butler, coherent at last. Then the big bodyguard noticed

his sister in the group. “Juliet! You’re alive.”

Juliet stepped forward, but awkwardly, as though not familiar with her own workings. “Braddur,” she said, her voice cracked and strangely accented. “Embrash me.”

“No, old friend,” warned Holly, glimpsing the flickering warrior inside Butler’s sister. “Juliet is possessed.”

Butler understood immediately. They had previously encountered fairy possession when Artemis had been wrapped up in his Atlantis Complex.

The bodyguard’s features sagged, and in that moment his decades of soldiering were written on his face.

“Jules. Are you in there?”

The warrior queen Bellico used Juliet’s memories to answer, but the vocal cords were not under her complete control. Her words were unclear, as though heard through tinny speakers, and the accent was an unusual blend of thick Scandinavian and Deep South American.

“Yesh, braddur. It ish I. Zooooliet.”

Butler saw the truth. The body might be his sister’s, but the mind certainly wasn’t.

Artemis joined them, laying a hand on Holly’s shoulder, a blotch of blood on his shirt where he had coughed. As usual, he found the most pertinent question to ask.

“Why do they not attack?”

Holly physically jerked.

Why not? Of course why not?

Butler reiterated. “Why aren’t they attacking? They’ve got numbers over us, and emotionally we’re a mess. That thing is my sister, for heaven’s sake.”

Holly remembered why they remained unmolested.

We are hosts inside the circle. They need us.

The souls flapped overhead, rearing up to descend.

I can explain what I am about to do, thought Holly. Or I can just do it.

Easier to just do it and hope there was an opportunity to apologize later.

She expertly flicked the settings wheel on the barrel of her Neutrino and shot Butler on his exposed neck and Artemis on the hand in blurred

succession.

Now we won't be possessed, she thought. But, on the downside, these Berserkers will probably simply kill us.

The souls dropped onto their intended hosts like sheets of wet polythene. Holly felt ectoplasm cram itself into her mouth, but the spirit would not be able to possess her because of the rune under her collar.

Hold on, she told herself. Hold on.

Holly tasted clay and bile. She heard echoes of screams from ten thousand years earlier, and experienced the Battle of Tailte as though she herself had stood on that plain where blood ran through the stake pits, and waves of humanity rolled across the meadow, blackening the grass with their passage.

It all happened just the way my father told me, Holly realized.

The soul howled in frustration as it lost purchase and was repelled, flapping into the air.

Two Berserker souls fought for entry into Artemis and Butler but were repulsed. Butler had keeled over like a felled redwood when Holly's shot hit him, and Artemis clasped his hand, stunned that their friend Holly would burn their bare skin with her Neutrino beams.

Artemis had quickly and mistakenly concluded that Holly had been possessed by one of the Danu, something he now knew all about from the soul who had tried to occupy him.

He sank to his knees and watched through pain-slitted eyes as the Berserker warriors advanced. Was Holly an enemy or friend now? He could not be sure. She seemed herself and had swung her weapon at the horde.

Opal's voice came from beyond the throng, shielded by its mass.

"They have protected themselves. Kill them now, my soldiers. Bring their heads to me."

Artemis coughed. *Bring their heads to me? Opal used to be a little more subtle. It's true what they say: Prison does not rehabilitate people. Not pixies, at any rate.*

His own baby brothers advanced toward him with murder in their eyes. Two four-year-olds moving with increasing grace and speed.

Are they stronger now? Could Myles and Beckett actually succeed in

killing us?

And if they didn't, perhaps those pirates would, with their rusting cutlasses.

"Butler," Artemis rasped. "Retreat and evaluate."

It was their only option.

There is no proactive move open to us.

This realization irritated Artemis, even though he was in mortal danger.

"Retreat and try not to injure anybody except those pirates. The Chinese warrior mummies and I will not be overly upset if a few animals are harmed. After all, it is us or them."

But Butler was not listening to Artemis's uncharacteristically nervous diatribe, because Holly's shot had pulsed his vagus nerve and knocked him out cold. A shot in a million.

It was up to Holly to defend the group. It should be fine. All Captain Short had to do was set her custom Neutrino on a wide burst to buy them some time.

Then a pirate's blackjack twirled from the fingers of a pirate's skeletal hand and cracked Holly's nose, sending her tumbling backward on top of Butler's frame.

Artemis watched the possessed creatures advance the final steps toward him and was dismayed that at the end it all came down to the physical.

I always thought my intellect would keep me alive, but now I shall be killed by my own baby brother with a rock. The ultimate sibling rivalry.

Then the ground opened beneath his feet and swallowed the group whole.

Opal Koboi elbowed through her acolytes to the edge of the chasm that had suddenly appeared to suck her nemeses from their fate.

"No!" she squealed, tiny fists pounding the air. "I wanted their heads. On spikes. You people do that all the time, right?"

"We do," admitted Oro, through the mouth of Beckett. "Limbs too, betimes."

Opal could have sworn that, underneath her stamping feet, the ground burped.

CHAPTER 7

LICKETY-SPIT

The Fowl Estate, Several Feet Belowground

Artemis tumbled down and down, striking knees and elbows against the crooks of roots and sharp limestone corners that protruded from the earth like half-buried books. Clumps of dirt crumbled around him, and stones rattled down his shirt and up his pant legs. His view was obstructed by the twirl of tumble and layers of earth, but there was a glowing above. And below too? Was that possible?

Artemis was confused by the thump of wood behind one ear and the luminous glow from below. It was below, wasn't it?

I feel like Alice falling into Wonderland.

A line came to him:

It would be so nice if something made sense for a change.

No fall can last forever when gravity is involved, and Artemis's descent was mercifully gradual as the crater funneled to a bottleneck, which Butler and Holly had the decency to block with their tangled frames and limbs before they plopped through the hole. Rough hands grabbed at Artemis, tugging him through to a tunnel beneath.

Artemis landed on the body heap and blinked the mud from his eyes. Someone, or something, stood naked before him, an ethereal figure glowing with divine light from head to foot. It reached out a shining hand and spoke in a deep movie promo voice:

“Pull my finger.”

Artemis relaxed neck muscles that he hadn't realized were tensed.
“Mulch.”

“The one and only. Saving your brainiac butt once more. Remind me, who’s supposed to be the genius around here?”

“Mulch,” said Artemis again.

Mulch pointed his proffered finger like a gun. “Aha. You’re repeating yourself. You once told me that repeating yourself is an exercise in redundancy. Well, who’s redundant now, Mud Boy? What good did your genius do you with those freaks up there?”

“None,” admitted Artemis. “Can we argue later?”

“‘Cause you’re losing the argument,” scoffed Mulch.

“No, because *those freaks* are on our tail. We need to retreat and regroup.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Mulch, reaching a forearm into a hole in the tunnel wall and yanking out a thick root. “Nobody’s following us anywhere once I collapse the tunnel mouth. But you might want to scoot forward a yard or two.”

The earth above them rumbled like thunderclouds cresting a low mountain, and Artemis was gripped with a sudden certainty that they were all about to be crushed. He scurried forward and flattened himself against the cold dark mud wall, as if that could possibly make any difference.

But Mulch’s tunnel held its integrity, and only the spot where Artemis had been was completely blocked.

Mulch wrapped his fingers around Butler’s ankle and, with some effort, hauled the unconscious bodyguard along the tunnel floor.

“You carry Holly. Gently now. By the looks of your hand, she drove those spirits away and saved your life. Before I saved it. Probably just after Butler saved it. You seeing a pattern emerging, Artemis? You starting to realize who the liability is here?”

Artemis looked at his hand. He was branded with a spiral rune where Holly had blasted him. The last globs of Berserker ectoplasm slicking his hair caused him to shudder at the sight.

A protection rune.

Holly had branded them to save them. And to think he had doubted her.

Artemis scooped up Holly and followed the glowing dwarf, tentatively feeling his way with tapping toes.

“Slow down,” he called. “It’s dark in here.”

Mulch’s voice echoed along the tunnel. “Follow the globes, Arty. I gave ’em an extra coating of dwarf spit, the magical solution that can do it all, from glow in the dark to repel ghostly boarders. I should bottle this stuff. Follow the globes.”

Artemis squinted at the retreating glow and could indeed distinguish two wobbling globes that shone a little brighter than the rest.

Once he realized what the globes were, Artemis decided not to follow too closely. He had seen those globes in action and still had the occasional nightmare.

The tunnel undulated and curved until Artemis’s internal compass surrendered what little sense of direction it had. He traipsed behind Mulch’s glowing rear end, glancing down at his unconscious friend in his arms. She seemed so small and frail, though Artemis had seen her take on a horde of trolls in his defense.

“The odds are against us, as they have been so often, my friend,” he whispered, as much to himself as to Holly. He ran a rough calculation, factoring in the desperate situations they had endured over the past few years, the relative IQ of Opal Koboi, and the approximate number of opponents he had glimpsed aboveground. “I would estimate our chances of survival to be less than fifteen percent. But, on the plus side, we have survived, indeed been victorious, against greater odds. Once.”

Obviously Artemis’s whispers carried down the tunnel, for Mulch’s voice drifted back to him.

“You need to stop thinking with your head, Mud Boy, and start thinking with your heart.”

Artemis sighed. The heart was an organ for pumping oxygen-rich blood to the cells. It could no more *think* than an apple could tap-dance. He was about to explain this to the dwarf when the tunnel opened to a large chamber, and Artemis’s breath was taken away.

The chamber was the size of a small barn, with walls sloping to an apex. There were feeder tunnels dotted at various heights, and blobs of glowing gunk suckered to exposed rock served as a lighting system. Artemis had seen

this particular system before.

“Dwarf phlegm,” he said, nodding at a low cluster of tennis ball–sized blobs. “Hardens once excreted, and glows with a luminescence unmatched in nature.”

“It’s not all phlegm,” said the dwarf mysteriously, and for once Artemis did not feel like getting to the bottom of Mulch’s mystery, as the bottom of Mulch’s mysteries was generally in the vicinity of Mulch’s mysterious bottom. Artemis placed Holly gently on a bed of fake-fur coats and recognized a designer label.

“These are my mother’s coats.”

Mulch dropped Butler’s leg. “Yep. Well, possession is nine-tenths of the law, so why don’t you take your tenth back up to the surface and talk larceny with the thing that used to be Opal Koboi?”

This was a good point. Artemis had no desire to be booted out of this sanctuary.

“Are we safe down here? Won’t they follow us?”

“They can try,” said Mulch, then he spat a glowing wad of spit on top of a fading spatter. “But it would take a couple of days with industrial drills and sonar. And even then I could bring the whole thing down with a well-placed burst of dwarf gas.”

Artemis found this hard to believe. “Seriously. One *blast*, and this entire structure comes tumbling down?”

Mulch adopted a heroic pose, one foot on a rock, hands on hips. “In my line of work, you gotta be ready to move on. Just walk away.”

Artemis did not appreciate the heroic pose. “Please, Mulch, I beg you. Put on some pants.”

Mulch grudgingly agreed, tugging faded tunneling breeches over his meaty thighs. This was as far as he was prepared to go, and his furry chest and prodigious gut remained glowing and bare.

“The pants I will wear for Holly’s sake, but this is my home, Artemis. In the cave, Diggums keeps it casual.”

Water dripped from a stalactite into a shimmering pool. Artemis dipped his hand in, then laid his palm on Holly’s forehead. She was still unconscious following her second physical trauma in as many minutes, and a single spark

of magic squatted on her head wound, buzzing like an industrious golden bee. The bee seemed to notice Artemis's hand and skipped onto the brand, calming his skin but leaving a raised scar. Once it had finished its work, the magic returned to Holly and spread itself like a salve across her forehead. Holly's breathing was deep and regular, and she seemed more like a person asleep than unconscious.

"How long have you been here, Mulch?"

"Why? Are you looking for back rent?"

"No, I am simply collating information at the moment. The more I know, the more comprehensively I can plan."

Mulch nudged the lid from a cooler, which Artemis recognized from an old picnic set of the family's, and pulled out a bloodred salami.

"You keep saying that 'bout comprehensive planning, et cetera, and we keep ending up eyeball-deep in the troll hole without spring boots."

Artemis had long ago stopped asking Mulch to explain his metaphors. He was desperate for any information that might give him an edge, something that would help him wrest control of this desperate situation.

Focus, he told himself. There is so much at stake here. More than ever before.

Artemis felt ragged. His chest heaved from recent healings and exertions. Uncharacteristically, he did not know what to do, other than wait for his friends to wake up.

He shuffled across to Butler, checking his pupils for signs of brain injury. Holly had shot him in the neck, and they had taken quite a tumble. He was relieved to find both pupils to be of equal size.

Mulch squatted beside him, glowing like a dumpy demigod, which was a little disturbing if you knew what the dwarf was actually like. Mulch Diggums was about as far from godliness as a hedgehog was from smoothness.

"What do you think of my place?" asked the dwarf.

"This is..." Artemis gestured to their surroundings. "Amazing. You hollowed all of this out yourself. How long have you been here?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Coupla years. Off and on, you know. I have a dozen of these little bolt-holes all over the place. I got tired of being a law-

abiding citizen. So I siphon off a little juice from your geothermal rods and pirate your cable.”

“Why live down here at all?”

“I don’t *live* live here. I crash here occasionally. When things get hot. I just pulled a pretty big job and needed to hide out for a while.”

Artemis looked around. “A pretty big job, you say? So where’s all the loot?”

Mulch wagged a finger that glowed like a party stick. “That, as my cousin Nord would say, is where my improvised lie falls apart.”

Artemis put two and two together and arrived at a very unpleasant four.

“You were here to rob me!”

“No, I wasn’t. How dare you?!”

“You are lurking down here to tunnel into Fowl Manor. Again.”

“*Lurking* is not a nice word. Makes me sound like a sea serpent. I like to think I was hiding in the shadows. Cool, like a cat burglar.”

“You eat cats, Mulch.”

Mulch joined his hands. “Okay. I admit it. I might have been planning to have a peek into the art vault. But look at the funny side. Stealing stuff from a criminal mastermind. That’s gotta be ironic. You brainiacs like irony, right?”

Artemis was appalled. “You can’t keep art here. It’s damp and muddy.”

“Didn’t do the pharaohs any harm,” argued the dwarf.

Holly, who lay on the ground beside them, opened her eyes, coughed, then executed a move that was much more difficult than it looked by actually springing vertically from where she lay and landing on her feet. Mulch was impressed until Holly attempted to strangle him with his own beard, at which point he stopped being impressed and got busy choking.

This was a problem with waking up after a magical healing: often the brain is totally unharmed, but the mind is confused. It is a strange feeling to be smart and dopey at the same time. Add a time lapse into the mix, and a person will often find it difficult to transition from a dream state to the waking world, so it is advisable to place the patient in tranquil surroundings, perhaps with some childhood toys heaped around the pillow. Unfortunately for Holly, she had lost consciousness in the middle of a life-or-death struggle and awoke to find a glowing monster looming over her. So, she

understandably overreacted.

It took about five seconds before she realized who Mulch was.

“Oh,” she mumbled sheepishly. “It’s you.”

“Yes,” said Mulch, then coughed up something that squeaked and crawled away. “If you could please relinquish the beard—I just had a salon conditioning treatment done.”

“Really?”

“Of course not really. I live in a cavern. I eat dirt. What do you think?”

Holly finger-combed Mulch’s beard a little, then climbed down from the dwarf’s shoulders.

“I was just sitting in spit, right?” she said, grimacing.

“It’s not *all* spit,” said Artemis.

“Well, Artemis,” she said, rubbing the faint red mark on her forehead, “what’s the plan?”

“And hello to you, too,” said Mulch. “And don’t thank me. Saving your life once more has been my pleasure. Just one of the many services offered by Diggums Airlines.”

Holly scowled at him. “I have a warrant out for you.”

“So why don’t you arrest me, then?”

“The secure facilities aren’t really operating at the moment.”

Mulch took a moment to process this, and the trademark bravado drained from his craggy features, crease by crease. It almost seemed like his glow dimmed a few notches.

“Oh, holy lord Vortex,” he said, tracing the sacred sign of the bloated intestine over his stomach to ward off evil. “What has Opal done now?”

Holly sat on a mound, tapping her wrist computer to see if anything worked.

“She’s found and opened the Berserker Gate.”

“And that’s not the worst thing,” said Artemis. “She killed her younger self, which destroyed everything Opal has invented or influenced since then. Haven is shut down, and humans are back in the Stone Age.”

Holly’s face was grim in the glow of luminous spit. “Actually, Artemis, finding the Berserker Gate *is* the worst thing, because there are two locks.

The first releases the Berserkers...”

Mulch jumped into the pause. “And the second? Come on, Holly, this is no time for theatrics.”

Holly hugged her knees like a lost child. “The second releases Armageddon. If Opal succeeds in opening it, every single human on the surface of the earth will be killed.”

Artemis felt his head spin as the bloody scale of Opal’s plan became clear.

Butler chose this moment to regain his senses. “Juliet is on the surface with Masters Beckett and Myles, so I guess we can’t let that happen.”

They sat in a tight group around a campfire of glowing spit while Holly told what had been considered a legend but was now being treated as pretty accurate historical fact.

“Most of this you will already know from the spirits who tried to invade you.”

Butler rubbed his branded neck. “Not me. I was out cold. All I have is fractured images. Pretty gross stuff, even for me. Severed limbs, people being buried alive. Dwarfs riding trolls into battle? Could that have happened?”

“It all happened,” Holly confirmed. “There was a dwarf corps that rode trolls.”

“Yep,” said Mulch. “They called themselves the Troll Riders. Pretty cool name, right? There was a group that only went out at night who called themselves the Night Troll Riders.”

Artemis couldn’t help himself. “What were the daytime troll riders called?”

“Those gauchos were called the Daytime Troll Riders,” answered Mulch blithely. “Head to toe in leather. They smelled like the inside of a stinkworm’s bladder, but they got the job done.”

Holly could have wept with frustration, but she’d learned during her brief period as a private investigator when Mulch had served as her partner that the dwarf would shut up only when he was good and ready. Artemis, on the other hand, should know better.

“Artemis,” she said sharply, “don’t encourage him. We are on a

timetable.”

Artemis’s expression seemed almost helpless in the luminescence. “Of course. No more comments. I am feeling a little overwhelmed, truth be told. Continue, Holly, please.”

And so Holly told her story, her features sharply lit from below by the unconventional glow. Butler could not help but be reminded of horror stories told to him and his fellow scouts by Master Prunes on weekend trips to the Dan-yr-Ogof cave in Wales. Holly’s delivery was bare bones, but the circumstances sent a shiver along his spine.

And I do not shiver easily, thought the big man, shifting uncomfortably on the muddied root that served as a seat.

“When I was a child, my father told me the story of Tailte almost every night so that I would never forget the sacrifice our ancestors made. Some laid down their lives, but a few went beyond even that and deferred their afterlives.” Holly closed her eyes and tried to tell it as she had heard it. “Ten thousand years ago, humans fought to eradicate the fairy families from the face of the earth. There was no reason for them to do this. Fairies are in the main peace-loving people, and their healing abilities and special connection to the land were of benefit to all, but always among the humans there are those individuals who would control all they see and are threatened by that which they do not understand.”

Artemis refrained from making the obvious point that it was one of the fairy folk who was more or less attempting to destroy the world presently, but he filed it away to trot out at a later date.

“And so the People took refuge on the misty isle of Ériú, the home of magic, where they were most powerful. And they dug their healing pits and massed their army at the Plains of Tailte for a last stand.”

The others were silent now as Holly spoke, for they could see the scene in their own memories.

“It was a brief battle,” said Holly bitterly. “The humans showed no mercy, and it was clear by the first night that the People were doomed to extermination. And so the Council decided that they would retreat to the catacombs below the earth from whence they had come before the dawn of the age of man. All except the demons, who used magic to lift their island out of time.”

“Okay,” said Mulch. “I was sticking with it, but then you said *whence*, so now I have to go to the fridge.”

Holly scowled briefly, then continued. By now everyone knew that eating was how Mulch handled bad news, and good news, and banal news. All news, really.

“But the Council reasoned that even their underground refuge would be in danger from the humans, and so they built a gate with an enchanted lock. If this lock were ever opened, then the souls of the Berserker warriors buried around the gate would rise up and possess what bodies they could to prevent humans from gaining access.”

Artemis could still remember the sickly stench he’d experienced when the fairy Berserker had attempted to occupy his mind.

“And if the Berserker Gate were opened by fairy hand, then the warriors would be in thrall to that fairy to fight at his or her command. In this case, Opal Kobi.

“This spell was conjured to last for a century at least, until the People were safely away and the location of the gate forgotten.”

Holly’s lip curled as she said this, and Artemis made a deduction.

“But there was a betrayal?”

Holly’s eyes flickered in surprise. “How...? Yes, of course you would guess, Artemis. We were betrayed by the infamous gnome warlock, Shayden Fruid, once known as Shayden the Bold, but since called Shayden the Shame of Taillte. There’s an inverted statue of Shayden in the chapel of Hey-Hey, which is not meant as a compliment, believe me.”

“What happened, Holly?” said Artemis, urging her on.

“Shayden Fruid hid in a conjured mist until the dying Berserkers were buried around the gate and the People had descended into the underworld, and then he attempted to tamper with the lock. Not only did he intend to open the lock for the humans, but also to lead the enthralled Berserkers against their own people.”

“This guy was a real sweetheart,” Mulch called, his face bathed in fridge glow. “Legend has it that he once sold his own mother down the river. And I’m not talking metaphorically here. He actually put his mother in a boat and traded her in the next village downstream. That should have been a red flag right there.”

“But Shayden’s plan failed, didn’t it?” said Artemis.

“Yes, because the secret stage of the plan called for someone to stay behind and collapse the valley on top of the gate. A great warlock who could maintain the mist until the gate was buried, and then use it to cover his getaway. As the demons had already left, only the elfin warlock Bruin Fadda, whose hatred of the humans was legendary, could complete the mission, climbing to the lip of the valley to conjure the collapse that had been prepared by a team of dwarf engineers.”

Somehow it seemed to Artemis, Butler, and Holly that they had all experienced what had happened. Perhaps it was the last remnant of Berserker plasma on their brows, but suddenly they could hear the breath in Bruin Fadda’s throat as he raced down the hillside, screaming at Shayden to step away from the lock.

“They struggled fiercely, each mighty warrior mortally wounding the other. And at the end, Bruin, dying and driven mad with pain, hate, and despair, conjured a second lock, using his own blood and forbidden black magic. If that lock were to be opened, then Danu, the Earth mother, would surrender her magic to the air in a blast of power that would annihilate every human on the surface, and the People would be safe forever.”

“Just humans?”

Holly woke from her reverie. “Just humans. The hated oppressors. Bruin had lost every member of his family in a raid. He was beyond reason.”

Butler rubbed his chin. “Every weapon has a sell-by date, Holly. It’s been ten thousand years. Couldn’t this spell have a half-life or something?”

“It’s possible. But the Berserkers are loose, and the first lock worked just fine.”

“Why would Opal want to open the second lock?”

Artemis knew the answer to that one. “It’s political. There is a huge lobby in Haven that has been advocating for full-scale war for years. Opal would be a hero to them.”

Holly nodded. “Exactly. Plus, Opal is so far gone now that she seriously believes that her destiny is to be some kind of messiah. You saw what she was prepared to do just to escape.”

“Do tell,” said Mulch.

“She had her younger self kidnapped, and she then set up a fake ransom demand for her present self, so that we would put her inside a natural nuclear reactor, thus helping her to generate enough black magic for her to open the first lock.”

Mulch slammed the fridge door. “I am sincerely sorry I asked. This is typical of the kind of mess you get us into, Artemis.”

“Hey,” snapped Holly. “This is not the time to blame Artemis.”

“Thank you,” said Artemis. “Finally.”

“There will be plenty of time to blame Artemis later, when this is resolved.”

Artemis folded his arms with exaggerated movements. “That is uncalled for, Holly. I am as much a victim here as everyone else. Even those Berserkers are being used to fight a war that ended ten thousand years ago. Couldn’t we simply tell them the war is over? They are guarding a gate that I presume doesn’t even lead anywhere anymore.”

“That’s true. We haven’t used the old networks for millennia.”

“Can’t you somehow communicate that?”

“No. They are under fairy bonds. Nothing we say will make an impact.”

“How much time do we have?” asked Artemis.

“I don’t know,” admitted Holly. “My father told me the legend as a bedtime story. It was passed down to him from his father. The whole thing came from the mind of an empath warlock who synched with Bruin Fadda in his final moments. All we know is that the second lock is complex magic. Opal is running on black magic now, but that has a high price and fades fast. She will want to get it open before dawn, while the fairy moon is still high. Her Berserkers will be bare wisps of their former selves after all this time, and they can’t last much longer than that. Some will give in to the afterlife’s call before then.”

Artemis turned to Butler for a question about tactics. This was the bodyguard’s area of expertise. “How should Opal deploy her forces?”

“Opal will have most of those Berserkers gathered around her, watching her back while she picks that magical lock. The rest will guard the walls and run roving patrols around the estate, armed to the teeth, no doubt. Probably with my arms.”

“Do we have any weapons?” asked Artemis.

“I lost my Neutrino after the crash,” said Holly.

“I had to sign in my handgun at Haven immigration,” said Butler.
“Never had a chance to pick it up.”

Mulch returned to the campfire. “You did say every human on the surface would be killed. I just want to point out that you are underground. So you could, you know, just stay here.”

Holly shot him a pretty raw poisonous look.

“Hey, no need for that. It’s good to explore all the options.”

“If Opal does open the second lock, not only will it kill billions of humans, but it will spark off an unprecedented civil war among the People. After which Opal Koboï would probably declare herself supreme empress.”

“So you’re saying we should stop her?”

“I’m saying we *have* to stop her, but I don’t know how.”

Artemis looked toward the heavens as if divine inspiration were forthcoming, but all he could see were the glowing walls of Mulch’s subterranean refuge and the inky blackness of tunnel mouths dotted along their surfaces.

“Mulch,” he said, pointing. “Where do those tunnels lead?”

CHAPTER 8

MOTLEY CREW

Dalkey Island, South County Dublin

There is a common misconception that trolls are stupid. The fact is, trolls are only *relatively* stupid.

Compared to astrophysicists and Grand High Hey-Hey Monks, trolls could be considered a bit lacking in the IQ department; but even a below-average troll will solve a puzzle faster than any chimpanzee or dolphin on the planet. Trolls have been known to fashion crude tools, learn sign language, and even grunt out a few intelligible syllables. In the early Middle Ages, when troll sideshows were legal, the famous performing troll Count Amos Moonbeam would be fed honey punch by his dwarf handler until he belched out a fair approximation of *The Ballad of Tingly Smalls*.

So, trolls stupid?

Definitely not.

What trolls *are* is stubborn. Pathologically so. If a troll suspects that someone wishes it to exit through door A, then it will definitely choose door B, possibly after relieving itself all over door A on the way out.

This made it difficult for trolls to integrate in the Lower Elements. The LEP even have a special troll division of trained handlers who log the most overtime hours per capita tracking down rogue trolls who refuse to be corralled in the tunnels of suburban Haven. At any given time there are a hundred-plus trolls who have chewed out their tracking chips and are crawling through cracks in the earth's crust, moving inexorably toward magical hot spots on the surface.

Trolls are drawn to magical residue like dwarfs are drawn to stuff that doesn't belong to them. Trolls feed on residue. It nourishes them and

increases their life spans. And as they grow older, they grow craftier.

The oldest troll on record has been known by many names in his lifetime. His mother may have named him Gruff, or she may have been trying to say *Get off*. To LEPtroll he was simply Suspect Zero, and to the humans he was the Abominable Snowman, Bigfoot, or El Chupacabra, depending on which area he had been spotted in.

Gruff had stayed alive for several extra centuries by being prepared to hike across the globe in search of magical residue. There was not a continent he had not visited under cover of darkness, and his graying hide was crisscrossed with the scars and scorch marks of a hundred tussles with the LEP and various human hunters. If Gruff could put a sentence together, he would probably say:

Maybe I look beat up, but you should see the other guys.

Gruff was currently residing in a cave on Dalkey Island, off the coast of South Dublin, and he would swim ashore to a private slipway and help himself to livestock from surrounding farms. He had been spotted a few times by the owner of the slipway, an eccentric Irishman who now sang to him nightly from across the bay. Gruff knew that he would either have to move on or eat the human in the next couple of days, but for this particular evening he was content to lay his head on the carcass of a sheep, which would serve as a pillow for now and as breakfast later on.

His sleep was interrupted by the activation of a sixth sense that inhabited the space in his brain somewhere between taste and smell. There was magical activity nearby that set the inside of his skull a-tingling, as though fireflies had hatched in there. And where there was magic, there would undoubtedly be residue. Enough to cure the ache in his back and seal up the running sore on his haunch where a walrus had gored him.

Gruff scooped sausages of offal from the sheep's innards and swallowed them whole to sustain him for the trip. And as he lowered himself into the sea for the short swim to the mainland, he felt the magic's lure grow stronger and his spirits lifted.

Gruff longed for the sweet nectar of residue to cure what ailed him. And when a troll has its stout heart set on something, there are not many things on this earth capable of blocking its way.

CHAPTER 9

SPEWING THE BITTER POISON

The Fowl Estate

Opal stood on the edge of the collapsed tunnel feeling mildly thwarted but not in the least downhearted. After all, she was a veritable dynamo of black magic for the time being, and Artemis Fowl was buried beneath a ton of rubble—if not dead, then certainly disheveled, which would vex the Mud Boy almost as much.

Whether he was dead or not, the plan remained the same.

Oro kneeled and picked up Holly’s weapon from the crumbled clay. “What is this, mistress?”

Opal held the handgun cupped in her tiny hands and communicated with its energy until the energy agreed to transfer itself across to her person. It was undramatic to watch—the weapon simply exhaled and crumpled.

“I must open the second lock,” she said to Oro, refreshed by this morsel of power. “I have until morning. Then my magic will evaporate with the dawn dew, and I will be left defenseless.”

“The second lock?” said Oro, Beckett’s vocal cords mangling the Gnommish. “Are you certain, mistress?”

“*Queen*,” corrected Opal. “You will refer to me as Queen Opal. By opening the first lock of the Berserker Gate, I have bonded you to me. But I would prefer that you referred to me as little as possible, as your silly human voice box irritates me. And stop scowling. The expression looks ridiculous on your little boy face. Mommy is tempted to spank you.”

“But the second lock?” persisted Oro. “That will unleash the power of Danu.”

“Firstly, what did I just say about referring to me? Secondly, take a peek inside the brain of your human. A little Danu wave is the best thing for this planet.”

Oro seemed puzzled, but his bonds forbade him to argue, and Opal knew that even if the Berserker could argue, his points would be presented in turgid Middle Ages prose with simplistic logic.

“Let me speak to the human boy,” she said, reasoning that a Fowl child, however young, would appreciate what she had accomplished here. Plus it would be fun to watch a human squirm.

Oro sighed, wishing that his old friend Bruin Fadda had built a little leeway into the fairy bonds, then shuddered as he allowed his own consciousness to be subsumed temporarily by Beckett Fowl’s.

The centuries dropped from Oro’s face, and Beckett emerged shiny and smiling.

“I was dreaming,” he said. “In my dream I looked like me but with more fingers.”

Opal spread her arms wide, allowing the black magic to pulse in orange cables along her limbs. “Are you not terrified, boy?”

Beckett hopped monkeylike into his version of a ninja pose. “Nope. *You* should be terror-fied.”

“Me?” said Opal, laughing. “You cannot harm me. The fairy bonds prevent it.”

Beckett punched Opal in the stomach, from the shoulder like Butler had taught him.

“Oh yeah. I’m pretty fast. Faster than your stupid fairy bonds. Butler says I’m a natch-u-ral.”

Opal’s breath left her in a huff and she stumbled backward, cracking her elbow on the Berserker Gate’s raised dais. Luckily for her, the fairy bonds kicked in and Oro reclaimed control of the body; otherwise four-year-old Beckett Fowl might have put an end to Opal’s world domination plans right there.

Oro rushed to help Opal up. “My queen, are you harmed?”

Opal waved her hand, unable to speak, and was forced to endure several seconds of Oro pumping her torso up and down like a bellows until her breath returned.

“Release me, you stupid elf. Are you trying to break my spine?”

Oro did as he was told. “That boy is a quick one. He beat the bonds. Not many could do that.”

Opal rubbed her stomach with a magic hand, just in case there was bruising.

“Are you sure you didn’t give the boy a little help?” she said suspiciously.

“Of course not, my queen,” said Oro. “Berserkers do not help humans. Do you wish to speak with the boy again?”

“No!” Opal squeaked, then regained her composure. “I mean...no. The boy has served his purpose. We must move ahead with the plan.”

Oro knelt, scooping a handful of loose earth. “We should at least give chase to our attackers. The elf has battle skills; the big human is also a formidable warrior. They will most definitely attempt sabotage.”

Opal was prepared to concede this point. “Very well, tiresome elf. Send your craftiest lieutenant with a few soldiers. Make sure to include the other boy in your party. Fowl may be reluctant to kill his own brother.” Opal blew through her lips, a small action that made it abundantly clear that she herself would not hesitate to kill any family member were she in Fowl’s position. In fact, she would see any hesitation to hack down a sibling as a lack of commitment to the plan.

After all, she thought, did I not personally have myself killed to escape prison?

But fairies were weak, and humans were weaker. Perhaps Fowl would hold back for the second it took for his little brother to plant a dagger in his side.

“Do not waste too much time or resources. I want a circle of Berserker steel behind me while I work on the second lock. There are complex enchantments to unravel.”

Oro stood, closing his eyes for a second to enjoy the breeze on his face. From beyond the walls he could hear the crackle of enormous flames, and

when he opened his eyes the smolder of distant destruction licked the night clouds.

“We are eager but few, my queen. Shall there be more enemies on the way?”

Opal made a sound that was almost a cackle. “Not until morning. My enemies are experiencing certain difficulties. Mommy saw to that.”

The part of Oro’s mind that was still his own and not in thrall to a glowing orange pixie thought: *It is unseemly that she refers to herself as our mother. She is mocking us.*

But such is the strength of fairy *geasa*, or bonds, that even this rebellious thought caused the Berserker captain physical pain.

Opal noticed his wince. “What are you thinking, Captain? Nothing seditious, I hope?”

“No, my queen,” said Oro. “This puny body is unable to contain my bloodlust.”

This lie cost him another twinge, but he was ready for it and bore it without reaction.

Opal frowned. That one had ideas of his own, but no matter. Oro’s energy was already fading. The Berserkers would barely last the night, and by then the second lock would be open and the Koboï era would truly begin.

“Go, then,” she snapped. “Choose a hunting party, but *your* duty is to protect the gate. I have arranged for the humans to be occupied for the moment, but once the sun rises they will come in a wave of destruction to destroy the last of our kind.” Opal decided to go all Gothic, so Oro would get the point. “Without mercy in their cold merciless hearts they shall come unto us.”

This kind of talk seemed to penetrate, and Oro stamped away to pick his hunting party.

The entire situation was, Opal had to admit to herself, absolutely perfect. The Berserkers would guard the perimeter, pitiful in their mistaken belief that their big gloomy gate actually led somewhere. And then they would simply evaporate into the afterlife, unaware of the unnecessary genocide they had helped to commit.

Ghosts make such unreliable tribunal witnesses, Opal thought, smirking.

But as enjoyable as self-congratulatory smirking might be, there was actual work to be done that required the entirety of her intellect. The lock remained locked, and she could only hold on to the black magic for so long before it consumed her physical body. Already she could feel blisters rising between her shoulder blades. The magic would leave her soon, but before then it would wreak havoc on her system.

Her power healed the blisters as soon as they rose, but that cost her magic, and the blisters came back anyway.

Why can't I solve this problem by killing someone? she thought petulantly, then comforted herself with the mantra that had kept her going in prison:

"Soon all the humans will be dead," she said, droning in the time-honored fashion of gurus everywhere. "And then Opal will be loved."

And even if I'm not loved, she thought, at least all the humans will be dead.

Oro stumped on little legs down the age-old steps that ran around the Berserker Gate and for a moment remembered clearly the day when he had helped construct this squat tower. There had been more magic involved than heavy lifting, though. Old Bruin Fadda had his team pouring every spark of power they could get their hands on into the lock. A big circle of warlocks hurling lightning bolts into the stone.

Whoever opens this gate will get more than they bargained for, Bruin had promised later that week, even as Oro and his men lay dying. Bruin had been wrong. Queen Opal got exactly what she had been expecting.

How did she know? Oro wondered. I was almost certain that the world had forgotten us.

The Berserkers were bristling with repressed violence and anxious to inflict damage on humankind. They tried to stand still as Oro addressed them, but it was a struggle, especially for the pirates who were unable to stop their exposed bones from rattling.

Oro stood on a tree stump so that the small body he occupied could be seen by all, and held his fist aloft for silence.

"My warriors!" he shouted over the ranks. "Our day has finally come!"

This was met with a chorus of yells, whoops, barks, and whistles as the various creatures inhabited by the Berserkers voiced their approval. Oro could not hide a wince. These were not the warriors he remembered, who fought and suffered mortal wounds on the Plains of Tailte, but they were what they were, and the will to fight was there, if not the ability. There were foxes in their ranks, for Danu's sake. How was a fox supposed to heft a sword? Still, better to get his warriors' blood going with some rhetoric. Oro had always been proud of his speechifying.

"We will drink the bitter poison of our defeat and spew it at our enemies!" he shouted, his voice carrying across the meadow.

His warriors cheered, roared, and howled their approval, except for one.

"Pardon?" said his lieutenant, Gobdaw.

"What?" said Oro.

The lieutenant, who lurked inside the body of the second Mud Boy, wore a puzzled expression on his pasty face. In truth, puzzlement of any kind was new for Gobdaw. He was usually an *ask no questions* kind of fairy who did his talking with an ax. Generally, Gobdaw loved a nice bit of rhetoric.

"Well, Oro," said Gobdaw, seeming a little surprised by the words coming out of his mouth, "what does that mean, exactly? Spewing the bitter poison of our defeat at our enemies?"

This question took Oro by surprise. "Well, it simply means..."

"Because if you don't mind my saying, using the word *defeat* in a motivational speech sends a little bit of a mixed message."

Now it was Oro's turn to be perplexed. "Motivational? Mixed message? What do these terms even mean?"

Gobdaw looked as though he might cry. "I don't know, Captain. It's my human host. He's a strong one."

"Pull yourself together, Gobdaw. You have always appreciated my rhetoric."

"I did. I do, Captain. The young one refuses to be silenced."

Oro decided to distract Gobdaw with duty. "You have the honor of leading the search for enemies. Take the hounds, Bellico, and those mariners too. Everybody else, surround the gate. Queen Opal labors at the second lock. Understood?"

“Yes, Captain,” roared Gobdaw, shaking his fist. “As you command.”
Oro nodded. That was more like it.

Gobdaw, Bellico, and the Fowl hunting hounds circled the collapsed tunnel. Bellico was feeling pretty good about herself, encased as she was in the body of Juliet Butler. This was a better host than she could have hoped for; an excellent physical specimen equipped with the knowledge of several ancient fighting styles, which, thanks to Juliet’s memories, she knew how to put into practice very well indeed.

Bellico checked her reflection in the blade of a pirate’s knife and was pleased with what she saw.

Not too ugly, for a human. It is almost a pity my life force will sustain me no more than a single night. Perhaps if we had been called upon within fifty years of being laid in the ground, then the magic could have sustained us for longer, but now our spirits are weakened by time. The spell was not constructed to keep us earthbound for this long.

Bellico’s memory contained images that painted an ugly picture of Opal Koboi, but she had been warned that human visions of the fairy folk were unreliable. Such was the Mud Men’s hatred of the People that even their memories would be skewed.

The pirates were less pleased with their inherited corpses, which disintegrated even as they walked.

“It’s costing me all my magic just holding this skin sack of maggots together,” complained the one-time warrior giant Salton Finnacre, who inhabited the body of Eusebius Fowl the lung-sucking pirate.

“At least you’ve got legs,” grumbled his battle partner J’Heez Nunyon, who hobbled along on a pair of wooden stumps. “How am I supposed to do my signature dervish move on these things? I’m gonna look like a bleepin’ drunk dwarf falling over.”

It was worse for the English pointer hounds, who could only form the most rudimentary sounds with their vocal cords.

“Fowl,” barked one, being very familiar with Artemis’s scent. “Fowl. Fowl.”

“Good boy,” said Gobdaw, reaching up to pat the hound’s head with Myles’s little hand, which the dog did not think was very funny at all and

would have bitten it had it not belonged to a superior officer.

Gobdaw called to his soldiers, “Warriors. Our noble brothers inside these beasts have picked up a trail. Our mission is to find the humans.”

No one asked, *What then?* Everybody knew what you did to humans when you found them. Because if you didn’t do it to them, they would do it to you, and your entire species, and probably anyone your species had ever shared a flagon of beer with.

“And the elf?” asked Bellico. “What of her?”

“The elf made her choice,” said Gobdaw. “If she steps aside, then we let her live. If she stands her ground, then she becomes as a Mud Person to us.” Sweat rolled down Gobdaw’s brow though the night was growing cool, and he spoke through clenched teeth, trying to hold back Myles Fowl’s consciousness, which bubbled up inside him like mental indigestion.

This exchange was cut short when the English pointers streaked away from the collapsed tunnel mouth and across the meadow toward the large human dwelling that crested the hill.

“Ah,” said Bellico, taking off after the dogs. “The humans are in the stone temple.”

Gobdaw tried to stop himself from talking but failed. “He says to tell you that it’s called a manor. And that all girls are stupid.”

Artemis, Holly, and Butler squirmed along a tunnel that Mulch had assured them would emerge in the wine cellar behind a rack of Château Margaux 1995.

Artemis was horrified by this revelation. “Don’t you know that your tunnel could affect the temperature of the cellar? Not to mention the humidity? That wine is an investment.”

“Don’t worry about the wine, silly Mud Boy,” said Mulch in a very patronizing tone that he had developed and practiced simply to annoy Artemis. “I drank that months ago and replaced it. It was the only responsible thing to do—after all, the cellar’s integrity had been compromised.”

“Yes, by you!” Artemis frowned. “Replaced it with what?”

“Do you really want to know?” the dwarf asked, and Artemis shook his head, deciding that, given the dwarf’s history, in this particular case *ignorance* would be less disturbing than the truth.

“Wise decision,” said Mulch. “So, to continue. The tunnel runs to the back of the cellar, but the wall is plugged.”

“Plugged with what?” asked Artemis, who could be a bit slow in spite of his genius.

The dwarf finger-combed his beard. “I refer you to my last question: Do you really want to know?”

“Can we break through?” asked Butler, the pragmatist.

“Oh yes,” said Mulch. “A big strong human like you. No problem. I’d do it for you, but apparently I have this other mission.”

Holly looked up from her wrist computer, which still wasn’t picking up a signal. “We need you to get the weapons in the shuttle, Mulch. Butler has some kit in the house, but Juliet could already be leading the Berserkers there. We need to move fast and on two fronts. A pincer movement.”

Mulch sighed. “Pincer. I love crab. And lobster. Makes me a little gassy, but it’s worth it.”

Holly slapped her knees. “Time to go,” she said.

Neither of the humans argued.

Mulch watched his friends climb into the manor tunnel and then turned back the way they had come, toward the shuttle.

I don’t like retracing my steps, he thought. Because there’s usually someone chasing after me.

So now here they were, wriggling along a claustrophobic tunnel with the heavy smell of earth in their noses and the ever-present threat of untold tonnage looming above them like a giant anvil.

Holly knew what everyone was thinking. “This tunnel is sound. Mulch is the best digger in the business,” she said between grunts and breaths.

The tunnel meandered, and their only light was from a cell phone taped to Butler’s forehead. Artemis had this sudden vision of the three of them stuck in there forever, like rodents in the belly of a snake, being slowly digested until not a trace remained.

No one will ever know what happened to us.

This was a redundant thought, Artemis knew, because if they didn’t get out of this tunnel, then in all likelihood there would be no one left to wonder

what had become of their small group. And he would never know if he had failed to save his parents or if they had already been killed somehow in London.

Nevertheless, Artemis could not shake the notion that they were about to die in this vast unmarked grave, and it grew stronger with every grasping reach of his hand that drew him farther into the earth.

Artemis reached forward once more in the blackness and his scrabbling fingers met Butler's boot.

"I think we made it," said the bodyguard. "We've reached the blockage."

"Is the blockage solid?" called Holly from the rear.

There followed a series of noises that would not sound out of place in a jelly factory, and a smell that would be totally consistent with a burst sewage pipe.

Butler coughed several times, swore at length, then said a line heavy with dreadful implication. "Only the crust is solid."

They tumbled through the hole onto a fallen rack of broken wine bottles, which had been knocked over by Butler's hurried entry. Usually he would have inched his way through the entrance, moving the rack bit by bit, but in this case speed was more important than stealth, and so he simply crashed through Mulch's tunnel plug and into the cellar beyond. The other two quickly followed, happy to escape the confines of the tunnel.

Artemis sniffed the liquid pooling in concave curves of broken bottle fragments. "That is most definitely not Chateau Margaux 1995," he commented.

"It's not even snake wine," said Butler, brushing himself off. "Although I know a few mercenaries who would probably drink it."

Holly hiked up the tall seventeenth-century stone cellar steps, then pressed her ear to the door.

"I can't hear anything," she said after a moment. "Wind from outside, that's all."

Butler pulled Artemis from the rack wreckage. "Let's keep going, Artemis. We need to get to my weapons before it occurs to Juliet's passenger."

Holly opened the door a crack and peeped through. Halfway down a corridor was a bunch of pirates armed with automatic weapons. They stood absolutely still, probably in an attempt to stop their bones from rattling.

Butler crept up behind her.

“How are we doing?” he asked.

Holly held her breath as she closed the door.

“Not great,” she said.

They squatted behind a rack of 1990s California reds and spoke in urgent whispers.

“What do we have?” asked Artemis.

Butler held up his fists. “I’ve got these. That’s it.”

Holly searched the pockets of her jumpsuit. “Some plasti-cuffs. A couple of flares. Not much of an inventory.”

Artemis touched the tip of each finger against the pad of his thumb, one of his focusing exercises. “We have something else,” he said. “We have the house.”

CHAPTER 10

SIBLING RIVALRY

Fowl Manor

Gobdaw and Bellico followed the hounds up Fowl Manor's grand stairs and along the hallway to Artemis's laboratory. Once through the door, the dogs leaped on Artemis's white coat, which was hanging from a peg, using their teeth and claws to slash and chew the material.

"They smell the human," said Gobdaw, disappointed not to have an opportunity to use the baby Glock that fit so neatly in Myles's little hand.

They had raided Butler's arms room, which was hidden behind a false wall in his quarters. Only four people knew the location of and passcode to the keypad—five, now, if Bellico could be counted as a separate person from Juliet. Gobdaw helped himself to the small gun and several blades, while Bellico chose a machine pistol and a carbon graphite recurve bow with a quiver of aluminium arrows. The pirates took more or less everything else, dancing happy jigs as they clattered downstairs to lie in wait.

"We should keep looking," said Gobdaw.

Bellico did not agree, as she had Juliet's knowledge of the manor. "No. Artemis's office adjoins this room, so they will come here. We have warriors in the basement and the safe room. Let the hounds and the pirates herd them toward us."

Gobdaw had enough leader's experience to know a good plan when he heard it.

"Very well. We wait here, but if I don't get to fire this gun before sunrise, I shall be most disappointed."

"Don't worry. You will need every bullet for the big human."

Bellico grabbed the hounds by their collars and yanked them from the coat.

“You two should be ashamed,” she said. “Do not lose yourselves inside those beasts.”

One hound butted the second, as though the mistake had been his alone.

“Go now,” said Bellico, kicking their rumps. “And find us some Mud People.”

Gobdaw and Bellico squatted behind the worktop, one nocking an arrow and the other disengaging the safety on his stolen handgun.

“The house is a virtual fortress,” explained Artemis. “Once the siege function has been engaged on the security panel, then it would take an army to penetrate the defenses, all of which were designed and installed before Opal jumped from her time line, so there is no chance any of the components will have exploded.”

“And where is this panel?” asked Holly.

Artemis tapped his watch. “Usually I can access it remotely on my watch or phone, but the Fowl network is down. I upgraded the router recently and perhaps a Kobo component crept in, so we will have to use the panel in my office.”

Butler knew it was his function to play devil’s advocate. “Won’t that just lock us in here with a bunch of pirates?”

Artemis smiled. “Or lock them in here with us.”

Salton Finnacre was bemoaning the loss of his own body to his mate J’Heez.

“Remember those arm muscles I had?” he said wistfully. “They woz like tree trunks. Now look at me.” He jiggled his left arm to demonstrate how the flaps of flesh hung loosely from his bones. “I can barely hold this fire stick.”

“It ain’t a fire stick,” said J’Heez. “They’re called *guns*. That’s a simple enough word to remember, ain’t it?”

Salton looked at the automatic handgun in his bony fingers. “I suppose. Just point and pull, is it?”

“That’s what Bellico said.”

“Did you hear that, Berserkers?” Salton asked the half dozen pirates

squashed into the stairwell behind him. “Just point and shoot. And don’t worry about hitting the person in front of you, because we are already dead.”

They stood in the red-bricked corridor, praying for some humans to wander past. After all this time, it would be a shame if they didn’t get to kill anyone.

Ten feet below, in the wine cellar, Butler hefted two bottles of Macallan 1926 Fine and Rare whiskey.

“Your father will not be pleased,” he said to Artemis. “This is thirty thousand euros per missile.”

Artemis wrapped his fingers around the door handle. “I feel certain he will understand, given the circumstances.”

Butler chuckled briefly. “Oh, we’re telling your father about the circumstances this time? That will be a first.”

“Well, perhaps not *all* the circumstances,” said Artemis, and he opened the door wide.

Butler stepped into the gap and lobbed the bottles at the ceiling over the pirates’ heads. Both smashed, showering the Berserkers with high-alcohol liquid. Holly stepped under Butler’s legs and shot a single flare into their midst. In less than a second the entire bunch of pirates was engulfed in a *whoosh* of blue and orange flames, which painted the ceiling black. It didn’t seem to bother the pirates too much, except for the one with the peg legs, who was soon left without a leg to stand on. The rest lived on as skeletons, bringing their guns around to bear on the cellar door.

“The house will save us?” asked Holly nervously. “That’s what you said.”

“Three,” said Artemis. “Two...one.”

Right on cue, the manor’s fire-safe system registered the rise in temperature and instructed eight of its two hundred nozzles to submerge the flames in sub-zero extinguisher foam. The pirates were driven to their knees by the force of the spray, and they yanked their triggers blindly, sending ricochets zinging off the walls and down the stairs. The bullets played out their kinetic energy on the steel bannisters and fell to the ground, smoking. In the corridor, the pirates’ bone temperature dropped over a hundred degrees in less than ten seconds, making them as brittle as pressed leaves.

“Here we go,” said Butler, and he charged up the stairs, crashing through the disoriented pirates like a vengeful bowling ball. The unfortunate Berserkers shattered under the lightest impact, disintegrating into a million bone crystals, which fluttered in the air like snowflakes. Holly and Artemis followed the bodyguard, racing down the corridor, their feet crunching on bone shards, not stopping to collect weapons—most of which had exploded in the fire, rendering them useless.

As usual, Artemis was sandwiched between Butler and Holly as they fled.

“Keep moving,” Holly called from behind. “There will be more of them, count on it.”

There were more pirates in the panic room, feeling very pleased with themselves.

“This is the smartest thing we ever done,” said Pronk O’Chtayle, acting commander. “They comes in here to hide from us, but we is already here.” He gathered his bony crew around him. “Let’s go over it again. What does we do when we hears them?”

“We hides,” said the pirates.

“And what does we do when they comes in?”

“We pops up real sudden,” said the pirates gleefully.

Pronk pointed a bony finger. “What does you do, specifically?”

A small pirate who seemed to be wearing the remains of a barrel stood by the wall. “I bangs on this here button, dropping the steel door so’s we’re all trapped in here.”

“Good,” said Pronk. “Good.”

The sound of staccato gunfire bounced off the vaulted ceilings and echoed along the corridor to the panic room.

“They’re coming, comrades,” said Pronk. “Remember to kill ’em several times just to be sure. Stop slicing when yer arms fall off.”

They squatted in the gloom, light from the outside glinting on their blades.

If Bellico had probed a little deeper into Juliet’s memories, she would have

realized that the panic room could be accessed or sealed from the outside, remotely, or with a voice-activation program. But even if she had known, it would not have made any sense for the humans to lock themselves out of their own haven. That would be pure insanity. Butler barely paused on his way past the panic-room door to talk into the small speaker set into the steel frame.

“Butler D.,” he said clearly. “Authorization prime. Lock.”

A heavy door dropped down, sealing the panic room completely and locking the giddy bunch of Berserker pirates inside. Artemis had barely a second to glance under the door.

Is that a pirate wearing a barrel? he thought. Nothing would surprise me today.

On reaching the laboratory/office work suite, Butler held up his fist. Artemis was not familiar with military hand signals and crashed into the bodyguard’s broad back. Fortunately the teen did not have the heft behind him to budge the bodyguard, for if Butler had taken so much as a stumbled step forward, he would have surely been skewered by one of his sister’s arrows.

“I see,” whispered Artemis. “The raised fist means *Stop*.”

Butler placed a finger to his lips.

“And that would mean you wish me to be quiet. Oh, I understand.”

Artemis’s words were enough to elicit a reaction from inside the lab, taking the form of an aluminium arrow that penetrated the partition wall, thumping through the plasterboard, sending flakes fluttering.

Butler and Holly did not discuss a strategy, as they were both experienced soldiers and knew that the best time to attack was directly after shots had been fired—or in this case, arrows.

“Left,” said Butler, and that was all he needed to say. Translated for the layman, his utterance signified that he would take any hostiles on the left of the room, leaving the right side for Holly.

They darted low going in, splitting into two targets as they crossed the floor. Butler had the advantage of being extremely familiar with the lab’s layout, and he knew that the only logical hiding place would be behind the long stainless steel workbench where Artemis played around with the

unknown and built his experimental models.

I have always wondered how secure this thing is, he thought, before charging it like a football player entering a scrimmage where the cost of losing was death. He heard an arrow whistle past his ear a second before his shoulder rammed the stainless steel, lifting the bench from its supply cables in a flurry of sparks and a hiss of gas.

Gobdaw clambered on top of the bench, and he had both a short sword and fire stick raised to strike when the Bunsen burner gas said hello to the electric cable. Sparks and a brief explosion resulted, flipping the Berserker backward into the velvet curtains.

Bellico assessed the situation quickly and bolted toward the office.

Butler saw her go. "I'm after Juliet," he barked at Holly. "You subdue Myles."

Perhaps the boy is unconscious, thought Holly, but this hope faded as she saw Myles Fowl disentangle himself from the velvet curtains. The look in his eyes told her that there was still a Berserker in that body and that he was not in the mood for surrender. He was armed only with a short blade now, but Holly knew the Berserkers would fight to the last drop of blood, even if the blood was not, strictly speaking, their own.

"Don't hurt him," said Artemis. "He's only four years old."

Gobdaw grinned, showing a mouthful of baby teeth, which Myles cleaned religiously with a toothbrush modeled on Einstein's head, the bristles being Einstein's trademark spiky hair. "That's right, traitor. Gobdaw is only four years old, so don't hurt me."

Holly wished that Artemis would stay out of it. This Gobdaw might look innocent, but he had far more battle experience than she would ever wish to have; and, judging by the way he was twirling the blade on his palm, he hadn't lost any of his knife skills.

If this guy was in his own body, he would take me apart, she realized.

Holly's problem was that her heart was not in this fight. Quite apart from the fact that she was battling Artemis's little brother, this was Gobdaw, for heaven's sake. Gobdaw the legend. Gobdaw, who had led the charge at Tailte. Gobdaw, who had carried a wounded comrade across an icy lake at Bellannon. Gobdaw, who'd been cornered by two wolves in a cave after the Cooley raid and come out of that cave wearing a new fur coat.

The two soldiers circled each other.

“Is it true about the wolves?” Holly asked in Gnommish.

Gobdaw missed a step, surprised. “The wolves at Cooley? How do you know this tale?”

“Are you kidding?” said Holly. “Everyone knows that. At school, it was part of the pageant, every year. To be honest, I am sick of that story. Two wolves, right?”

“There were two,” said Gobdaw. “One was sickly, though.”

Gobdaw began his strike in mid-sentence, as Holly had known he would. His blade hand darted forward, aiming for his opponent’s midriff; but he didn’t have quite the reach he used to possess, and Holly rapped him hard on the nerve cluster in his deltoid, deadening the arm. That arm was about as much use now as a lead pipe hanging from his shoulder.

“D’Arvit,” swore Gobdaw. “You are a tricky one. Females were ever treacherous.”

“Keep talking,” said Holly. “I am liking you less and less, which should make my job a lot easier.”

Gobdaw took three running steps and jumped onto a Regency hall chair, grabbing one of two crossed reproduction pikes from the wall.

“Be careful, Myles!” shouted Artemis, from force of habit. “That’s very sharp.”

“Sharp is it, Mud Boy? That’s the way I like my spears.” The warrior’s face twisted as though on the point of sneezing, then Myles broke through for a second.

“It’s not a spear, idiot. It’s a pike. You call yourself a warrior?”

Then the features twisted again, and Gobdaw was back. “Shaddup, boy. I’m in charge of this body.”

This brief breakthrough gave Artemis hope. His brother was in there somewhere, and he hadn’t lost a lick of his acid tongue.

Gobdaw tucked the pike under the crook of his good arm and charged. The pike seemed as big as a jousting lance in his hand. He fanned the tip from side to side in a flashing arc, slicing Holly’s elbow before she could sidestep the attack.

The wound was not serious, but it was painful, and Holly did not have

the magic for a quick heal.

“By Danu’s Beard,” said Gobdaw. “First blood to the Berserkers.”

The two soldiers faced each other a second time, but now Holly was backed into the corner with less room to maneuver, and Gobdaw’s deadened arm was coming back to life. The Berserker grabbed the pike with both hands, increasing the speed and steadiness of his sweep. He inched closer, giving Holly no space to make a move.

“I take no pleasure in this,” he said. “But then, I don’t feel much sorrow, either. You chose your worm, elf.”

Chose your worm was a reference to the fairy game of chewing root worms. A group of kids would dig up five worms, and each would choose one to pop in their mouth. Statistically, at least one of the worms would be in its dying cycle and have begun to rot from the inside, so one of the kids would be in for a putrid mouthful. But it didn’t matter, because the rules of the game dictated that you had to swallow it regardless. A human equivalent of this saying would be: *You made your bed, so now you have to lie in it.*

This looks bad, thought Holly. I don’t see any way of taking out Gobdaw without hurting Myles.

Suddenly Artemis waved his arms and shouted, “Myles! The tip of that pike is steel. Where does steel sit on the periodic table?”

Gobdaw’s features twisted, and Myles emerged. “Artemis, steel isn’t on the table. It is not an element, as you well know. It is composed of two elements: carbon and iron.”

Toward the end of the last sentence Gobdaw took control once more, just in time to feel his arms being yanked behind his back and to hear the sounds of the plasti-cuffs ratcheting over his wrists.

“You tricked me,” he said, not sure exactly how he’d been hoodwinked.

“Sorry, Gobdaw,” said Holly, lifting him by the collar. “The human doesn’t play fair.”

“When did humans ever play fair?” muttered Gobdaw, who at that moment would have gladly vacated young Myles Fowl’s head if another host had been available. But then he realized how clever Artemis had been.

That is not a bad strategy, he thought. Perhaps I can show the butterfly its own wings and turn that human’s trick against him.

Suddenly Myles's eyes rolled back in his head, and he hung slack in Holly's arms.

"I think Gobdaw has gone," said Holly. "Artemis, it looks like you have your brother back."

Butler pursued Bellico into the office, where she was two steps away from sabotaging the siege box. Her fist was drawn back for the strike when Butler hooked his own arm through the crook of her elbow and they spun like dancers away from the security terminal and onto the rug. Bellico's arm slipped free, and she pirouetted to the wall.

"You're finished," said Butler. "Why don't you release my sister?"

"Both of us will die first, human!" said Bellico, circling warily.

Butler stood his ground. "If you have access to my sister's memories, have a flick through them. You can never defeat me. She never has, and you never will."

Bellico froze for a moment, accessing the database of Juliet's mind. It was true, Butler had easily defeated his sister a thousand times. His talents were far superior to hers...but, wait. There was a vision of the big human on his back, with pain on his brow. He was speaking:

You really nailed me with that move, Jules. It came out of nowhere. How is your big old brother supposed to defend himself against that?

Bellico's eyes flashed. *Which move was the big human speaking of?*

She dug a little deeper and found a fifty-four-step *kata* that Juliet Butler had developed herself, loosely based on the teachings of Kano Jigoro, the founder of judo.

I have found the human's weak spot.

Bellico allowed the memory to fully surface and send instructions to the body. Juliet's limbs began to seamlessly perform the *kata*.

Butler frowned and dropped into a boxer's defensive stance. "Hey, what are you doing?"

Bellico did not answer. There was anxiety in the Mud Man's voice, and that was enough to assure Bellico that she had chosen the correct course of action. She swept around the office like a dancer, her speed increasing with each revolution.

“Stand still!” said Butler, struggling to keep her in his line of sight.
“You can’t win!”

Bellico could win, she was certain of it. This old man was no match for the young powerful body she inhabited. Faster and faster she spun, her feet barely touching the ground, air whistling through the jade ring that held her long ponytail.

“I’ll give you one more chance, Juliet, or whoever the hell you are. Then I will have to hurt you.”

He was bluffing. A scared, obvious bluff.

I will win, thought Bellico, feeling invulnerable now.

On the fifty-second step, Bellico launched herself high into the air, backward, then braced her hind leg against the wall, switching direction and increasing her altitude. She descended on Butler in a blur of speed, her heel aimed like an arrowhead at the nerve cluster in his neck.

Once the human is disabled, I will destroy the siege box, thought Bellico, already celebrating her victory.

Butler slapped her heel with his left palm and jabbed the fingers of his right hand into Bellico’s gut, just hard enough to wind her—and there is not a warrior on the planet who can fight when they cannot breathe. Bellico dropped like a sack of stones to the rug and lay whooping in the fetal position.

“How?” she gasped. “How?”

Butler lifted her by the collar. “That day was Juliet’s birthday. I let her win.”

He marched her toward the security panel and had typed in the lockdown sequence when he heard a snare-drum roll of claws clicking on the floor behind him. He recognized the pattern instantly.

The hound is attacking me.

But he was wrong. The hound hurled itself at Bellico, propelling them both underneath the descending steel shutter and through the office window, leaving Butler with a patch of material in his hand.

He stared blankly at the fallen shutter, thinking.

I did not even see her land, and I don’t know if my sister is alive or dead.

He hurried to Artemis's desk and activated the security cameras, just in time to see Juliet pat the dog and limp out of sight—back toward Opal, he supposed.

“Alive for now,” muttered the bodyguard.

And where there was life, there was hope. For a few more hours, at least.

CHAPTER 11

DEATH BY BUNNY

Below Fowl Manor and a Little to the Left

Nobody, human or fairy, had been declared dead more times than Mulch Diggums, and it was a record he was inordinately proud of. In Mulch's eyes, being declared dead by the LEP was just a less embarrassing way for them to admit that he had escaped for the umpteenth time. In the Sozzled Parrot fugitives' bar, LEP death certificates were printed up and tacked to the Wall of Heroes.

Mulch had fond memories of the very first time he had faked his own death to throw police officers off his trail.

My gods, could that really be over two hundred years ago now? Time flies faster than wind through a bum flap, as Grandmother used to say, bless her.

He'd been on a job with his cousin Nord, on Haven's moneyed mountain, when the homeowner had come home unexpectedly from the convention in Atlantis where he was supposed to be living it up on taxpayers' gold for two more days.

I hate it when they come home early, thought Mulch. Why do people do that when there's a very good chance they will find burglars in their living rooms?

Anyway, the homeowner happened to be ex-law enforcement and the registered owner of a buzz baton, which he had used on the dwarf cousins with great gusto. Nord managed to escape into their tunnel, but Mulch had been forced to clutch his heart, faking a cardiac, and then crash through a window, playing dead all the way down to the river below.

Corpsing was the hard part, remembered Mulch. There is nothing more

unnatural than keeping your arms slack when they want to be pinwheeling.

LEP had interviewed the ex-law enforcement homeowner, who had emphatically claimed: *Yeah, I killed him. It was an accident, of course. I only meant to maim that dwarf, then kick him senseless; but you can put that sucker down as dead. Nobody can corpse for three stories.*

And so Mulch Diggums was declared deceased for the first time. There would be twelve more official occasions on which people mistakenly thought Mulch had flown the final coop; and he was, unbeknownst to himself, tunneling toward an unofficial one at this very moment.

His instructions were simple enough. Dig a parallel tunnel to the one he had recently collapsed, sneak into the crashed *Cupid*, and then steal any weapons that were in the locker. *Dig, sneak, and steal.* Three of Mulch's four favorite verbs.

I do not know why I am doing this, Mulch thought as he tunneled. I should be heading down to the crust to find myself a nice crevice. They say that Opal's death wave will only kill humans, but why take such irresponsible chances with the great gift of life?

Mulch knew that this reasoning was a crock of troll patties, but he found he could dig better if he was annoyed, even if he was the object of his own annoyance. And so the dwarf fumed silently as he churned up through the earth toward the shuttle wreck.

Twenty feet up and thirty yards to the south, Opal Koboi was sinking her hands into the deep algebraic enchantments of the second Berserker lock. Symbols wrapped themselves like glowworms around her fingers and surrendered their power one by one as she discovered their secrets. Some could be beaten into submission by the sheer force of her black magic, but others had to be coaxed with sly hexes or magical tickles.

I am close, she thought. I can feel the earth's strength.

The wave of death would be in the form of geothermal energy, she presumed, and would be drawn from the entire planet's resources and not just the shallow hydrothermal reservoirs. This would put quite a dent in the world's reserves and could theoretically plunge Earth into another ice age.

We'll survive, she thought callously. I have some nice heated boots in storage.

The work was challenging but manageable, and it gave Opal some satisfaction to know that she was the only fairy alive who had done enough research on the intricacies of ancient magicks to open the second lock. The first had been simple—that had required little more than a blast of black magic—but the second needed an encyclopedic knowledge of spell craft.

That techno-fool Foaly would never have managed this. Not in a million years.

Opal was not aware of it, but so self-satisfied was she at that moment that she rolled her shoulders and made a purring noise.

Everything is going so well.

This plan had been outlandish even by her standards; but unlikely or not, all the elements were falling into place. Her initial thought had been to sacrifice her younger self and use the ill-gotten power to escape from the Deeps. It then occurred to her that this power would have to be jettisoned almost immediately to prevent it from eating her alive—so why not put it to good use?

Opportunity had presented itself to Opal when her younger self had made telepathic contact.

One morning Opal had been deep in a cleansing coma and—*ping!*—suddenly there was a voice in her head, calling her *Sister* and asking for help. It had occurred to her briefly that she could in fact be insane but, little by little, the information filtered through. *A younger Opal had followed Artemis Fowl from the past.*

I have no memory of this, Opal realized. Therefore, my younger self must have been captured and sent back with these events wiped from her mind.

Unless...

Unless the time line had split. Then anything was possible.

Opal was surprised to find her younger self a little whiny, even boring. Had she really been so self-absorbed?

It's all me me me, thought Opal. *I injured my leg in the explosion. My magic is fading. I need to get back to my own time.*

None of this was in the least helpful to Opal stuck in her prison.

What you need to do is get me out of here, she broadcast to her younger

self. *Then we can see to your injuries and send you home.*

But how to accomplish this? That darned centaur Foaly had incarcerated her in the most technologically advanced cell in the world.

The answer was simple: *I have to force them to release me because the alternative would be simply too horrible to even contemplate.*

Opal wrestled with the problem for several minutes before she accepted that the younger Opal would have to be sacrificed, and once that piece of the puzzle had clunked into place, she quickly built the rest of the plan around it.

Pip and Kip were two sleeper gnomes who worked in the civil service. The Council had sent them to do an audit of one of her factory's accounts a few years ago, and Opal had hypnotized them using forbidden runes and dark magic. All it took was a phone call from young Opal to activate their loyalty even at the cost of one or both of their lives. She broadcast instructions to young Opal, telling her exactly how to set up the fake kidnapping and telling her how to use the traces of dark magic still left in her system to find the legendary Berserker Gate. The gate was the way back to the past—or at least that was the story Opal sent out.

Younger Opal could not know, but the instructions for Pip and Kip were very specific for a reason. Hidden inside the words was a simple code that Opal had implanted along with their loyalty bonds. If young Opal had thought to write down all the letters that corresponded to prime numbers, she would have found a far more sinister message than the one she thought she was delivering:

Kill the hostage when time runs out.

You had to keep it simple for civil servants.

Everything had worked out exactly as she had foreseen, except for the arrival of Fowl and Short. But in a way, that too was a stroke of good fortune. Now she could kill them up close and personal.

Every cloud has a silver lining.

Suddenly Opal felt her stomach churn as a wave of nausea assailed her. The pixie's first thought was that the black magic was struggling with her own antibodies, but then she realized that the source was external.

Something offends my enhanced magical senses, she thought. Something over there.

The wrecked shuttle stood beyond the circle of warriors that stood guard over their queen.

Below the shuttle. Something is coated in a substance that sickens me.

It was that cursed dwarf, sticking his bum flap in where it didn't belong, and not for the first time.

Opal scowled. How many times must she bear humiliation from a flatulent dwarf? It was intolerable.

Sent to retrieve weapons from the ship, no doubt.

Opal raised her gaze fifteen degrees to the shuttle. Crushed though the *Cupid* was, her sixth sense could see an aura of magic winding around the fuselage like a fat snake. This particular wavelength would not help to open the second lock, but it could certainly provide enough juice for an extremely visible demonstration of her power.

Opal withdrew a hand from the sluggishly heaving rock and formed the fingers into a claw, arranging the molecules to attract any energy inside the *Cupid*. The power left the vehicle in a glowing morass, shrinking the *Cupid* to a wizened wreck and hovering in the air over the awed Berserkers.

“See what your queen can accomplish!” she cried, eyes bright. Her tiny fingers twirled, manipulating the energy into a sharp wedge, which she sent crashing through the earth to where the dwarf labored. There was a solid *thump*, and a spume of dirt and rocks jetted skyward, leaving a scorched crater in their wake.

Opal returned her attention to the second lock.

“Can you see the dwarf?” she asked Oro, who stood peering into the hole.

“I see one foot and some blood. The foot is jittering about, so he's still alive. I'll go and bring him up.”

“No,” said Opal. “You do not leave Mommy's sight. Send the earth creatures to kill him.”

If the fairy bonds had not had Oro's free will in such a tight bind, he would have taken Opal to task for repeatedly disrespecting her elders; but as it was, even the thought of reprimanding his queen cost him a severe stomach cramp.

When the pain passed, he raised two fingers to his lips to whistle for his

diggers. He found out that it was not an easy thing to whistle with strange fingers, and all that emerged from his mouth was a watery slobbering noise.

“Don’t know that signal, chief,” said Yezhwi Khan, who had once been a pretty handy ax gnome. “Is that lunch break?”

“No!” shouted Oro. “I need my diggers. Gather ’round.”

A dozen rabbits hopped quickly to bunch at his feet. Their little whiskers quivered with anticipation of finally seeing some action.

“Get the dwarf,” Oro ordered. “I would say bring him back alive, but you do not really have the skills for parlay.”

The rabbits thumped their hind legs in agreement.

“So the order is simple,” said Oro, with a touch of regret. “Kill him.”

The rabbits piled en masse into the hole, eagerly scrabbling toward the injured dwarf.

Death by bunny, thought Oro. Not a nice way to go.

Oro did not wish to look. Dwarfs were part of the fairy world, and in other circumstances they could have been allies. From behind him he heard the crunch of bone and the rattled *whoosh* of earth collapsing.

Oro shuddered. He would face a troll any day before a bunch of carnivorous rabbits.

On the dais, Opal felt a load lift from her heart as another enemy suffered.

Soon it will be your turn to suffer, Foaly, she thought. But death would be too easy for you. Perhaps you are already suffering. Perhaps your lovely wife has already opened the gift my little gnomes sent to her.

Opal sang a little ditty as she worked on the second lock.

*“Hey, hey, hey,
This is the day,
Things are gonna go my way.”*

Opal was not consciously aware of it, but this was a popular song from the Pip and Kip show.

CHAPTER 12

THE DORK POSSE

Haven City, the Lower Elements

Things were as grim as they had ever been in Haven City. Even the groups of empath elves, who could clearly perceive residual images from bygone millennia, and who liked to lecture school fairies on how life was a bucket of sweet chilies compared to how it used to be in the prospecting days, had to admit that this was the darkest day in Haven's history.

The citizens of Haven were weathering their darkest night, made darker still by the absence of main power, which meant the only lights were the emergency lamps powered by the old geothermal generators. Dwarf spit had suddenly become a very valuable commodity, and many of Mulch's relatives could be seen roving the refugee camp that had sprung up around the statue of Frond, selling jars of luminous spit for an ingot or two.

The LEP were coping the best they could, working in most cases with limited equipment. The main problem was coordination. The net of cameras and wireless hubs suspended on gossamer wire from the cavern ceiling had been upgraded three years previously with lenses from Koboil Labs. The entire network had caught fire and rained down on the citizens of Haven, branding many of them with a lattice of scars. This meant that the LEP were operating without intelligence, and relying on old radios for audio communication. Some of the younger police officers had never been in the field without full support from their precious helmets and were feeling a little exposed without constant updates of information from Police Plaza.

Fifty percent of the force was currently committed to fighting a huge fire at Koboil Labs, which had been taken over by the Krom automobile company. The explosion and subsequent fire had collapsed a large section of the

underground cavern, and a pressure leak was barely being contained by plasti-gel cannons. The LEP had bulldozed through the rubble and bolstered the roof with pneumatic columns, but the fire was still liquefying the metal struts, and several types of toxic gas were jetting from cylinders around the compound.

Another ten percent of the officers were rounding up escaped prisoners from Howler's Peak, which had, until its containment field flickered out, housed most of the criminal goblin kingpins behind Haven's organized crime syndicates, as well as their enforcers and racketeers. These goblins were now scurrying around the backstreets of goblin town with their subcutaneous sleeper tags not responding to the frantic signals being repeatedly sent from headquarters. A few more-recently tagged goblins were unfortunate enough to have second-generation tags, which exploded inside their scalps, blowing holes in their skulls small enough to plug with a penny but large enough to be fatal to the cold-blooded creatures.

More of the officers were up to their eyeballs in the miscellaneous rescues, crowd control, and pursuit of opportunistic felons that went with a catastrophe of this magnitude.

And the rest of the LEP fairies had been put out of action by the explosion of the free cell phones they had recently won in a competition that they couldn't remember entering—sent, no doubt, by Opal's minions. In this manner, the evil pixie had managed to take out most of the Council, effectively crippling the People's government in this time of emergency.

Foaly and his brainiacs were left in Police Plaza, trying to somehow revive a network that had literally been fried. Commander Kelp had barely paused on his way out the door to issue instructions to the centaur.

"Just get the tech working," he said, strapping on a fourth holster. "Quick as you can."

"You don't understand!" Foaly objected.

Trouble cut him off with a chop of his hand through the air. "I never understand. That's why we pay you and your dork posse."

Foaly objected again. "They are not dorks!"

Trouble found space for yet another holster. "Really? That guy brings a Beanie Baby to work every day. And your nephew, Mayne, speaks fluent

Unicorn.”

“They’re not *all* dorks,” said Foaly, correcting himself.

“Just get this city working again,” said Trouble. “Lives depend on it.”

Foaly blocked the commander’s way. “You do understand that the old network is vaporized? Are you giving me free rein, to coin an offensive phrase, to do whatever I need to do?”

Trouble brushed him aside. “Do whatever you need to do.”

Foaly almost grinned.

Whatever I need to do.

Foaly knew that the secret of a successful product launch was often in the name. A catchy name is more likely to pique investors’ curiosity and help the new invention take off, whereas some plodding series of letters and numbers will put everyone to sleep and ensure the product crashes and burns.

The lab name for Foaly’s latest pet project was Aerial Radiation-Coded Light-Sensitive Surveillance Pterygota 2.0, which the centaur knew had far too many syllables for potential investors. Rich people liked to feel *cool*, and embarrassing themselves by mispronouncing that mouthful was never going to help them to achieve that; so Foaly nicknamed the little guys ARClights.

The ARClights were the latest in a series of experimental bio-mech organisms that Foaly was convinced were the future of technology. The centaur had met considerable resistance from the Council on ethical grounds because he was marrying technology to living beings, even though he argued that most of the LEP officers now had little chips implanted in their cerebellums to help them control their helmets. The Council’s counter-argument was that the officers could choose whether or not to have the implants, whereas Foaly’s little experiments were grown that way.

And so, Foaly had not been given the go-ahead for public trials. Which is not to say that he hadn’t conducted any. He just hadn’t released his precious ARClights in public, not in the fairy public, at any rate. On the Fowl Estate—now, that was another matter.

The entire ARClight project was contained in a single battered field kit case hidden in plain view on top of a locker in the lab. Foaly reared up on his hind legs to snag the case and plonked it down on his workstation.

His nephew, Mayne, clopped up behind him to see what was going on.

“*Dung navarr, Oncle?*” he said.

“No unicorn-speak today, Mayne,” said Foaly, settling into his modified office harness. “I don’t have time.”

Mayne folded his arms. “The unicorns are our cousins, Uncle. We should respect their tongue.”

Foaly moved closer to the case so the scanner could identify him and pop the locks.

“I do respect the unicorns, Mayne. But real unicorns cannot talk. That gibberish you’re spouting came from a miniseries.”

“Written by an *empath*,” said Mayne pointedly.

Foaly opened the case. “Listen, nephew, if you want to strap a horn to your forehead and go to conventions on the weekends, that’s completely fine. But today I need you in *this* universe. Understood?”

“Understood,” said Mayne, grumpily. His mood lifted when he saw what was in the case. “Are those Critters?”

“No,” said Foaly. “Critters are microorganisms. These are ARClights. The next generation.”

Mayne remembered something. “You were refused permission for trials with those, weren’t you?”

It irritated Foaly immensely that a centaur of his genius was being forced to justify himself to an assistant for the sake of relations with his sister.

“I got permission just now, from Commander Kelp. It’s all on video.”

“Wow,” said Mayne. “In that case, let’s see those little fellows in action.”

Maybe he’s not so bad, thought Foaly, keying in the activation code on an old-fashioned manual keyboard in the case.

Once the code was punched in, the case synched with the lab’s wall screen, splitting it into a dozen blank boxes. This was nothing particularly special, and would have absolutely no one clapping their hands and saying *Ooooh*. What *would* have people applauding and gushing was the swarm of miniature genetically modified dragonflies waking up inside the case. The insects shook their sleepy heads and set their wings buzzing, then lifted off in perfect

synchronized formation to hover at Foaly's eye level.

"Oooh," said Mayne, clapping his hands.

"Just wait," said Foaly, activating the little dragonflies' sensors.
"Prepare to be amazed."

The cloud of dragonflies jittered as though suddenly charged, and their tiny eyes glowed green. Eleven of the twelve onscreen boxes displayed composite 3-D views of Foaly, stitched together from the viewpoint of each insect. Not only did the insects read the visible spectrum, but also infrared, UV, and thermal. A constantly updating stream of data scrolled down the side of the screens, displaying reams of information on Foaly's heart rate, blood pressure, pulse, and gas emissions.

"These little beauties can go anywhere and see everything. They can glean information from every microbe. And all anyone can see is a swarm of dragonflies. My little ARClights could fly through the X-ray in an airport, and no one could tell they are stuffed with bio-tech. They go where I send them, and spy on who I tell them to."

Mayne pointed at a corner of the screen. "That section is blank."

Foaly harrumphed. "I did a trial in Fowl Manor. And Artemis somehow detected the virtually undetectable. I imagine my beauties are lying in pieces under an electron microscope in his laboratory."

"I didn't read that in any report."

"No. I forgot to mention it. That trial wasn't exactly an unqualified success, but this one will be."

Foaly's fingers were clicking blurs on the keyboard. "Once I program in the mission parameters, then my ARClights will have citywide surveillance restored in minutes." Foaly instructed a single bug to land on his index finger. "You, my little fellow, are special, because you will be going to my home, just to make sure my beloved Caballine is all right."

Mayne leaned in, peering at the little bug. "You can do that?"

Foaly wiggled his finger, and the bug flew off, winding sideways through a vent.

"I can do whatever I like. They are even coded to my voice. Watch." Foaly leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat. "ARClight activation code alpha alpha one. I am Foaly. Foaly is my name. Immediate deployment

to downtown Haven. Scenario three. All sections. Citywide disaster. Fly, my pretties, fly.”

The ARClights moved like a shoal of silver fish through water, gliding through the air in perfect synchronized flight, then forming into a tight cylinder and shooting through the vent. Their wings skittered against the chute wall, sending back data from every inch covered.

The theatricality appealed to Mayne’s graphic novel-loving sensibility.

“‘Fly, my pretties, fly.’ Cool. Did you make that up yourself?”

Foaly began analyzing the data that was already flooding in from his ARClights.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Every word a Foaly original.”

The ARClights could be steered manually; or, if that function was off-line, they would fly to preordained irradiated spots on the cavern roof. The tiny bio-tech insects performed perfectly, and within minutes Foaly had a functioning network suspended above Haven that could be manipulated with a word or gesture.

“Now, Mayne,” he said to his nephew. “I want you to take over here and feed information to Commander Kelp over the”—he shuddered—“radio. I am going to take a minute to check on your Aunty Caballine.”

“*Mak dak jiball, Oncle,*” said Mayne, saluting. Something else actual unicorns could not do.

Humans have a saying that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*, which basically means if you *think* it’s beautiful, then it *is* beautiful. The elfin version of this saying was composed by the great poet B.O. Selecta, who said: *Even the plainest of the plain shall deign to reign*, which critics have always thought was a bit rhymey. The dwarf version of the maxim is: *If it don’t stink, marry it*, which is slightly less romantic, but the general gist is the same.

Foaly had no need of these sayings, for in his mind beauty was personified by his wife, Caballine. If anyone had ever asked him for a definition of beauty, he would simply have directed their gaze to his wrist, and then activated the hologram crystal built into his wrist computer, projecting a revolving CG rendering of his wife into midair.

Foaly was so in love with his wife that he sighed whenever Caballine crossed his mind, which was several times an hour. As far as the centaur was concerned, he had found his soul mate.

Love had tugged Foaly's fetlock relatively late in life. When all the other centaurs had been galloping around the sim-pasture, pawing the dirt, texting the fillies, and sending their chosen ones candied carrots, Foaly had been up to his armpits in laboratory equipment, trying to get his radical inventions out of his head and into the real world. By the time he realized that love might be passing him by, it had already disappeared over the horizon. So the centaur convinced himself that he didn't need companionship and was content to live for his job and work friends.

Then, when Holly Short was missing in another dimension, he met Caballine at Police Plaza. At least that was what he told everyone. *Met* might be a slightly misleading verb, as it implies that the situation was pleasant, or at least nonviolent. What actually happened was that one of Foaly's face-recognition software programs malfunctioned in a bank camera and identified Caballine as a goblin bank robber. She was immediately pounced on by the security guard jumbo pixies and *ridden* to Police Plaza. The ultimate ignominy for a centaur.

By the time the entire mess was traced back to software error, Caballine had been confined to a gel cell for over three hours. She had missed her mother's birthday party and was extremely anxious to throttle the person responsible for the mix-up. Foaly was told by Commander Kelp in no uncertain terms to get down to the holding cells and take responsibility for his foul-up.

Foaly trudged down there, ready to spout one of a dozen standard excuses, all of which evaporated when he came face-to-face with Caballine in the hospitality suite. Foaly didn't meet many centaurs, and he certainly would never bump into one as beautiful as Caballine, with her chestnut eyes, strong wide nose, and glossy hair down to her waist.

"Just my luck," he blurted, without thinking. "That's just typical of my luck."

Caballine had herself all psyched up to tear metaphorical strips off the hide of whatever imbecile had been responsible for her incarceration—and perhaps actual strips, too—but Foaly's reaction gave her pause, and she decided to give him one chance to dig himself out of the hole he was in.

“What is just typical of your luck?” she said, regarding him frankly, letting him know that his answer better be a good one.

Foaly knew the pressure was on and so thought carefully before answering.

“It’s just typical of my luck,” he said eventually, “that I finally meet someone as beautiful as you, and all you want to do is kill me.”

This was a pretty good line, and, judging by the misery in Foaly’s eyes, there was also more than a grain of truth in it.

Caballine decided to take pity on the dejected centaur before her and dial down her antagonism a few notches, but it was too early to let Foaly off the hook completely.

“And why wouldn’t I want to kill you? You think I look like a criminal.”

“I don’t think that. I would never think that.”

“Really? Because the algorithm that identified me as a goblin bank robber is based on your thought patterns.”

This lady is smart, Foaly realized. Smart and gorgeous.

“True,” he said. “But I imagine there were secondary factors involved.”

“Such as?”

Foaly decided to go for broke. He felt an attraction toward this centaur that was short-circuiting his brain. The closest he could come to describing the sensation was a sustained low-level electrical shock, like the ones he inflicted on volunteers in his sleep-deprivation experiments.

“Such as, my machine is incredibly stupid, because you are the opposite of a goblin bank robber.”

Caballine was amused but not won over just yet.

“Which is?”

“Which is a non-goblin customer making a deposit.”

“Which is what I am, dummy.”

Foaly flinched. “What?”

“Dummy. Your machine is a dummy.”

“Yes. Absolutely. I will have it disassembled immediately and reassembled as a toaster.”

Caballine bit her lip and could have conceivably been holding back a

smile.

“That’s a start. But you still have a long way to go before we’re done here.”

“I understand. If you have any capital crimes in your past, I could wipe them from your record. In fact, if you’d like to disappear altogether, I could arrange that.” Foaly rethought this last sentence. “That sounded like I was going to have you killed, which I totally am not. The last thing I would ever do is have you killed. Quite the opposite.”

Caballine took her handbag from the back of a chair and slung it across her fringed blouse. “You are quite fond of opposites, Mr. Foaly. What is the opposite of having me killed?”

Foaly met her gaze for the first time. “Keeping you happy and alive forever.”

Caballine moved to leave, and Foaly thought, *Stupid donkey. You blew it.*

But she stopped at the threshold and threw Foaly a lifeline.

“I do have a parking ticket that I did pay, but your machines seem to have it in for me, and they swear I didn’t. You could have a look at that.”

“No problem,” said Foaly. “Consider it done and that machine compacted.”

“I’m going to tell all my friends about this,” said Caballine, already leaving the room, “when I see them at the Hoovre Gallery launch this weekend. Do you like art, Mr. Foaly?”

Foaly stood there for a full minute after she was gone, staring at the spot where Caballine’s head had been when she’d last spoke. Later on, he had to rewind the suite’s surveillance footage to make sure Caballine had kind of, sort of, asked him on a date.

And now they were married, and Foaly considered himself the luckiest dummy in the world and, even though the city was mired in a crisis the likes of which had never before been visited on the subterranean metropolis, he had no hesitation in taking a moment to check on his gorgeous wife, who would probably be at this moment at home worrying about him.

Caballine, he thought, I will be with you soon.

Since their wedding ritual, Foaly and his wife had shared a mental bond like the one often experienced by twins.

I know she is alive, he thought.

But that was all he knew. She could be hurt, trapped, distressed, or in danger. Foaly did not know. And he had to know.

The ARClight Foaly had dispatched to check on Caballine had been built especially for that purpose and knew exactly where to go. Foaly had months ago painted a corner of the kitchen ceiling with a laser that would attract the bug from hundreds of miles away if need be.

Foaly shunted the other ARClight feeds to the main situation room, where Mayne could monitor them, and then concentrated on Caballine's bug.

Fly, my pretty. Fly.

The modified dragonfly zipped through Police Plaza's vent system and out over the city, darting through the chaos that permeated the streets and buildings. Fires flared in the piazza and on the freeway. The billboards that lined every street had been reduced to carbonized frames, and floodwater filled the sunken open-air amphitheater as far as Row H.

Mayne can handle that for five minutes, thought Foaly. *I am coming, Caballine.*

The ARClight buzzed beyond the central plaza to the southern suburb, which had more of a rural feel. Genetically modified trees grew in small copses, and there were even controlled amounts of woodland creatures that were carefully monitored and released aboveground when they multiplied to nuisance levels. The dwellings here were modest, less modern in their architecture, and outside the evacuation zone. Foaly and Caballine lived in a small split-level with adobe walls and curved windows. The color scheme was autumnal throughout, and the décor had always been a little *back to nature* for Foaly's taste, though he would never have dreamed of mentioning it.

Foaly pulled his V-board toward him and expertly controlled the little bug with numerical coordinates, though it would have been easier to use a joystick, or even voice control. It was ironic that someone who was responsible for so many technological breakthroughs still preferred to use an ancient virtual keyboard that he had made from a window frame when he was in college.

The top half of the door was ajar, and so Foaly had his ARClight dip inside the lobby, which was decorated with woven wall hangings depicting great moments in centaurian history, such as the discovery of fire by King Thurgood, and the accidental discovery of penicillin by the stable hand Shammy Sod, whose name had entered the popular vernacular to mean an extremely lucky person, for example: *He's won the lottery for the second time, the shammy sod.*

The dragonfly whirred along the corridor to find Caballine sitting on her yoga blanket, staring at the cell phone in her hand. She looked shaken but unhurt, and was scrolling through the menus on her screen, looking for a network.

You will have no luck there, my love, thought Foaly, then sent a text to her phone directly from the ARClight.

There's a little dragonfly watching over you, said the text. Caballine read it and raised her face, searching for the bug. Foaly set the eyes flashing green to help her. Foaly's wife raised her hand, and the bug swooped down to land on her finger.

"My clever husband," she said, smiling. "What is happening to our city?"

Foaly sent another message, and made a mental note to add a voice box to the next version of the ARClights.

You are safe at home. We have had some major explosions, but all is under control.

Caballine nodded. "Will you be home soon?" she asked the bug.

Not soon. It could be a long night.

"Don't worry, honey. I know they need you. Is Holly okay?"

I don't know. We've lost contact, but if anyone can look after herself, it's Holly Short.

Caballine lifted her finger and the dragonfly hovered before her face. "You need to look after yourself, too, Mr. Technical Consultant."

I will, texted Foaly.

Caballine took a ribboned box from the low table. "While I'm waiting for you, I will open this lovely gift that someone sent to me, you romantic centaur."

Back in the lab, Foaly felt a stab of jealousy. A gift? Who would have sent a present? His jealousy was quickly trumped by anxiety. After all, this was the day of Opal Koboi's great revenge, and there was no one the pixie hated more than him.

Don't open it, he sent quickly. I did not send it, and bad things are happening.

But Caballine did not need to open the box, for it was both time- and DNA-coded, and as soon as she touched it, the omni-sensor on the side scanned her finger and set the opening mechanism whirring. The lid pinged away from the box, spinning away to slap the wall, and inside was...nothing. Literally nothing. A black absence that seemed to repel ambient light.

Caballine peered into the box. "What is this?" she asked. "One of your gizmos?"

Which was as much as Foaly heard, because the blackness—or whatever it was—shorted out the ARClight, leaving Foaly ignorant as to his wife's fate.

"No!" he blurted. "No. No."

Something was happening. Something sinister. Opal had decided to target Caballine specifically to torture him. He was sure of it. The pixie's accomplice, whoever it was, had mailed his wife this seemingly innocuous box, but it was far from harmless; Foaly would bet his two hundred plus patents on it.

What has she done?

The centaur agonized over the question for about five seconds, until Mayne stuck his head into the room.

"We have something from the ARClights. I think I should push it across to your screens."

Foaly stamped a hoof. "Not now, stupid pony. Caballine is in danger."

"You need to see this," said Mayne, standing his ground.

Something in his nephew's tone, a bite of steel that hinted at the centaur this boy would become, made Foaly look up. "Very well. Shunt it across."

The screens immediately came to life with overhead shots of Haven from dozens of angles. Each shot was black and white except for clusters of red dots.

“The dots are the escaped goblin sleeper/seekers,” explained Mayne. “The ARClights can detect their radiation signatures but not activate them.”

“But this is good news,” said Foaly irritably. “Send the coordinates to the agents on the ground.”

“They were moving randomly, but seconds ago they all changed direction, at exactly the same time.”

Foaly knew then what Opal had done, how her weapon had gotten past the courier’s security scans. She had used a sonix bomb.

“And they’re headed for my house,” he said.

Mayne swallowed. “Exactly. Just as fast as they can run. The first group will arrive in less than five minutes.”

At this point Mayne was talking to thin air, as Foaly had already galloped out through the side door.

CHAPTER 13

LUCKY DIP

Fowl Manor

Myles Fowl sat behind Artemis's desk in the mini office chair that his big brother had given to him as a birthday present. Artemis claimed it was custom-built, but actually the chair came from Elf Aralto, the famous design store that specialized in beautiful yet practical furniture for elves.

Myles was ratcheted up high, sipping his favorite beverage: acai juice from a martini glass. Two ice cubes, no straw.

"This is my favorite drink," he said, dabbing the corner of his mouth with a napkin monogrammed with the Fowl motto, *Aurum potestas est*. "I know that because I am me again and not a fairy warrior."

Artemis sat facing him in a similar but larger chair. "So you keep saying, Myles. Should I call you Myles?"

"Yes, of course," said Myles. "Because that is who I am. Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I do, little man. I know my own brother's face when I see it."

Myles toyed with the stem of his martini glass. "I need to talk with you alone, Arty. Can't Butler wait outside for a few moments? It's family talk."

"Butler is family. You know that, brother."

Myles pouted. "I know, but this is embarrassing."

"Butler has seen it all before. We have no secrets from him."

"Couldn't he just step outside for a minute?"

Butler stood silently behind Artemis, arms folded in an aggressive manner, which is not difficult to do with forearms the size of baked hams and sleeves that creak like old chairs.

“No, Myles. Butler stays.”

“Very well, Arty. You know best.”

Artemis leaned back in his chair. “What happened to the Berserker inside you, Myles?”

The four-year-old shrugged. “He went away. He was driving my head; then he left.”

“What was his name?”

Myles rolled his eyeballs upward, checking out his own brain. “Erm... Mr. Gobdaw, I believe.”

Artemis nodded like someone with a great deal of knowledge on the subject of this Gobdaw person would. “Ah yes, Gobdaw. I have heard all about Gobdaw from our fairy friends.”

“I think he was called Gobdaw the Legendary Warrior.”

Artemis chuckled. “I am sure he would like you to think that.”

“Because it’s true,” said Myles, with a slight tension around his mouth.

“That’s not what we heard, is it, Butler?”

Butler did not answer or gesture in any way, but somehow he gave the impression of a negative response.

“No,” continued Artemis. “What we heard from our fairy sources was that this Gobdaw person is a bit of a joke, to be frank.”

Myles’s fingers squeaked on the neck of his glass. “Joke? Who says that?”

“Everybody,” said Artemis, opening his laptop and checking the screen. “It’s in all the fairy history books. Here it is, look. Gobdaw the Gullible, they call him, which is nice because of the alliteration. There’s another article that refers to your Berserker friend as Gobdaw the Stinkworm, which I believe is a term used to describe a person who gets blamed for everything. We humans would call that a fall guy, or a scapegoat.”

Myles’s cheeks were rosy red now. “Stinkworm?”

Stinkworm, you say? Why would I...why would Gobdaw be called a stinkworm?”

“It’s sad, really, pathetic, but apparently this Gobdaw character was the one who convinced his leader to let the entire Berserker unit get themselves

buried around a gate.”

“A *magical* gate,” said Myles. “That protected the fairy elements.”

“That is what they were told, but in truth the gate was nothing more than a pile of stones. A diversion leading nowhere. The Berserkers spent ten thousand years guarding rocks.”

Myles kneaded his eyes. “No. That’s not...no. I saw it, in Gobdaw’s memories. The gate is real.”

Artemis laughed softly. “Gobdaw the Gullible. It’s a little cruel. There’s a rhyme, you know.”

“A rhyme?” rasped Myles, and rasping is unusual in four-year-olds.

“Oh yes, a schoolyard rhyme. Would you care to hear it?”

Myles seemed to be wrestling with his own face. “No. Yes, tell me.”

“Very well. Here goes.” Artemis cleared his throat theatrically.

*“Gobdaw, Gobdaw,
Buried in the ground,
Watching over sticks and stones,
Never to be found.”*

Artemis hid a smile behind his hand. “Children can be so cruel.”

Myles snapped in two ways. Firstly his patience snapped, revealing him to be in fact Gobdaw; and secondly his fingers snapped the martini glass’s stem, leaving him with a deadly weapon clasped in his tiny fingers.

“Death to the humans!” he squealed in Gnommish, vaulting onto the desk and racing across toward Artemis.

In combat, Gobdaw liked to visualize his strikes just before executing them. He found that it helped him to focus. So, in his mind he leaped gracefully from the lip of the desk, landed on Artemis’s chest, and plunged his glass stiletto into Artemis’s neck. This would have the double effect of killing the Mud Boy and also showering Gobdaw himself in arterial blood, which would help to make him look a little more fearsome.

What actually happened was a little different. Butler reached out and plucked Gobdaw from the air in mid-leap, flicked the glass stem from his grasp, and then wrapped him firmly in the prison of his meaty arms.

Artemis leaned forward in his chair. “There is a second verse,” he said. “But perhaps now is not the time.”

Gobdaw struggled furiously, but he had been utterly neutralized. In desperation, he tried the fairy *mesmer*.

“*You will order Butler to release me,*” he intoned.

Artemis was amused. “I doubt it,” he said. “You have barely enough magic to keep Myles in check.”

“Just kill me, then, and be done with it,” said Gobdaw without the slightest quiver in his voice.

“I cannot kill my own brother, so I need to get you out of his body without harming him.”

Gobdaw sneered. “That’s not possible, human. To get me, you must slay the boy.”

“You are misinformed,” said Artemis. “There is a way to exorcise your feisty soul without damaging Myles.”

“I would like to see you try it,” said Gobdaw, with perhaps a glimmer of doubt in his eyes.

“Your wish is my command and so on and so forth,” said Artemis, pressing a button on the desk intercom. “Bring it in, would you, Holly?”

The office door swung open, and a barrel trundled into the room, seemingly under its own power, until Holly was revealed behind it.

“I don’t like this, Artemis,” she said, playing good cop, just as they had planned. “This is nasty stuff. A person’s soul might never get into the afterlife trapped in this gunk.”

“Traitorous elf,” said Gobdaw, kicking his little feet. “You side with the humans.”

Holly waltzed the barrel trolley into the center of the office, parking it on the wooden floor and not on one of the precious Afghan rugs that Artemis insisted on describing in great historical detail every time she visited the office.

“I side with the earth,” she said, meeting Gobdaw’s eyes. “You have been in the ground for ten thousand years, warrior. Things have changed.”

“I have consulted my host’s memories,” said Gobdaw sullenly. “The humans have almost succeeded in destroying the entire planet. Things have

not changed so much.”

Artemis rose from his chair and unscrewed the barrel lock. “Do you also see a spacecraft that shoots bubbles from its exhaust?”

Gobdaw had a quick rifle through Myles’s brain. “Yes. Yes, I do. It’s made of gold, is it not?”

“This is one of Myles’s dream projects,” said Artemis slowly. “Merely a dream. The bubble jet. If you delve deeper into my brother’s imagination, you will find a robotic pony that does homework, and a monkey that has been taught to speak. The boy you inhabit is highly intelligent, Gobdaw, but he is only four. At that age there is a very fine line between reality and imagination.”

Gobdaw’s puffed-up chest deflated as he located these items in Myles’s brain. “Why are you telling me this, human?”

“I want you to see that you have been tricked. Opal Koboï is not the savior she pretends to be. She is a convicted murderer who has escaped from prison. She would undo ten thousand years of peace.”

“Peace!” said Gobdaw, then barked a laugh. “Peaceful humans? Even buried beneath the ground we felt your violence.” He wriggled in Butler’s arms, a mini Artemis with black hair and dark suit. “Do you call this *peace*?”

“No, and I apologize for your treatment, but I need my brother.” Artemis nodded at Butler, who hoisted Gobdaw over the open barrel. The little Berserker laughed.

“For millennia I was in the earth. Do you think Gobdaw fears imprisonment in a barrel?”

“You will not be imprisoned. A quick dunking is all that will be necessary.”

Gobdaw looked down between his dangling feet. The barrel was filled with a viscous, off-white liquid with congealed skin on its surface.

Holly turned her back. “I don’t care to watch this. I know what it feels like.”

“What is that?” asked Gobdaw nervously, feeling a cold sickness tipping at his toes from the *stuff*’s aura.

“That is a gift from Opal,” said Artemis. “A few years ago she stole a demon warlock’s power using that very barrel. I stored it in the basement,

because you never know, right?”

“What is it?” Gobdaw repeated.

“One of two natural magic inhibitors,” explained Artemis. “Rendered animal fat. Disgusting stuff, I admit. And I am sorry to dunk my brother in it, because he loves those shoes. We dip him down, and the rendered fat traps your soul. Myles comes out intact, and you are held in limbo for all eternity. Not exactly the reward you expected for your sacrifice.”

Something fizzed in the barrel, sending out tiny electrical bolts. “What the *bleep* is that?” squeaked Gobdaw, panic causing his voice to shoot up an octave.

“Oh, that is the second natural magic inhibitor. I had my dwarf friend spit into the barrel just to give it that extra zing.”

Gobdaw managed to free one arm and beat it against Butler’s biceps, but he might as well have been beating a boulder for all the effect it had.

“I will tell you nothing,” he said, his little pointed chin quivering.

Artemis held Gobdaw’s shins so that they would drop cleanly into the vat. “I know. Myles will tell me everything in a moment. I am sorry to do this to you, Gobdaw. You were a valiant warrior.”

“Not Gobdaw the Gullible, then?”

“No,” admitted Artemis. “That was a fiction to force you into revealing yourself. I had to be certain.”

Holly elbowed Artemis out of the way. “Berserker, listen to me. I know you are bound to Opal and cannot betray her, but this human is going in the vat one way or another. So vacate his body and move on to the afterlife. There is nothing more you can do here. This is not a fitting end for a mighty Berserker.”

Gobdaw sagged in Butler’s arms. “Ten thousand years. So many lifetimes.”

Holly touched Gobdaw’s cheek. “You have done everything asked of you. To rest now is no betrayal.”

“Perhaps the human is toying with me. This is a bluff.”

Holly shuddered. “The vat is no bluff. Opal imprisoned me in it once. It was as though my soul grew sick. Save yourself, I beg you.”

Artemis nodded toward Butler. “Very well, no more delays. Drop him

in.”

Butler shifted his grip to Gobdaw’s shoulders, lowering him slowly.

“Wait, Artemis!” cried Holly. “This is a fairy hero.”

“Sorry, Holly—there is no more time.”

Gobdaw’s toes hit the gunk, sending vaporous tendrils curling around his legs, and he knew in that instant that this was no bluff. His soul would be imprisoned forever in the rendered fat.

“Forgive me, Oro,” he said, casting his eyes to the heavens.

Gobdaw’s spirit peeled away from Myles and hovered in the air, etched in silver. For several moments it hung, seeming confused and anxious, until a dollop of light blossomed on its chest and began to swirl like a tiny cyclone. Gobdaw smiled then, and the hurt of the ages dropped from his face. The spinning light grew larger with each revolution, spreading its ripples to swallow Gobdaw’s limbs, torso, and finally, face, which at the moment of transition wore an expression that could only be described as blissful.

For the observers, it was impossible to look upon that ghostly face and not feel just a little envious.

Bliss, thought Artemis. Will I ever attain that state?

Myles shattered the moment by kicking his feet vigorously, sending ribbons of fat flying.

“Artemis! Get me out of here!” he ordered. “These are my favorite loafers!”

Artemis smiled. His little brother was back in control of his own mind.

Myles would not speak until he had cleaned his shoes with a wet wipe.

“That fairy ran through the mud in my shoes,” he complained, sipping a second glass of acai juice. “These are kidskin shoes, Arty.”

“He’s quite precocious, *n’est-ce pas?*” Artemis whispered from the side of his mouth.

“Look who’s talking, *plume de ma tante,*” Butler whispered right back at him.

Artemis picked Myles up and sat him on the edge of the desk. “Very well, little man. I need you to tell me everything you remember from your possession. The memories will soon begin to dissipate. That means...”

“I know what *dissipate* means, Arty. I’m not three, for heaven’s sake.”

Holly knew from long experience that shouting at Myles and Artemis would not hurry them along, but she also knew that it would make her feel better. And at the moment she felt glum and dirty after her treatment of one of the People’s most illustrious warriors. Yelling at Mud Boys might be just the thing to cheer her up a little.

She settled for a prod at medium volume. “Can you two get a move on? There is no time-stop in operation here. Morning is on the way.”

Myles waved at her. “Hello, fairy. You sound funny. Have you been sucking helium? Helium is an inert, monatomic gas, by the way.”

Holly snorted. “Oh, he’s your brother all right. We need whatever information he has in his head, Artemis.”

Artemis nodded. “Very well, Holly. I am working on it. Myles, what do you remember from Gobdaw’s visit?”

“I remember everything,” replied Myles proudly. “Would you like to hear about Opal’s plan to destroy humanity, or how she plans to open the second lock?”

Artemis took his brother’s hand. “I need to know everything, Myles. Start at the beginning.”

“I will start at the beginning, before the memories start to *dissipate*.”

Myles told them everything in language that was a decade beyond his years. He did not stray from the point or become confused, and at no instant did he seem worried about his future. This was because Artemis had often told his little brother that intelligence will always win out in the end, and there was nobody more intelligent than Artemis.

Unfortunately, after the events of the past six hours, Artemis did not have the same faith in his own maxim that he used to. And, as Myles told his story, Artemis began to believe that even his intelligence would not be enough to forge a happy ending from the mess they were mired in.

Perhaps we can win, he thought. But there will be no happy ending.

CHAPTER 14
NINE STICKS

Haven City, the Lower Elements

Foaly did not have much of a plan in his mind as he ran. All he knew was that he had to get to Caballine's side no matter how he achieved it. No matter what the cost.

This is what love does, he realized, and in that moment he understood why Artemis had kidnapped a fairy to get the money to find his father.

Love makes everything else seem inconsequential.

Even with the world crumbling around his ears, all Foaly could think about was Caballine's plight.

There are goblin criminals converging on our house.

Opal had known that, as an LEP consultant, Foaly would require that all deliveries to his house be scanned as a matter of routine. So she had sent an ornate gift box that would appear empty to the scanners. In actuality, though, no box is ever truly empty. This one would be packed with microorganisms that vibrated at a high frequency, producing an ultrasonic whine that would knock out surveillance and drive goblins absolutely crazy—so much so that they would do anything to stop it.

Goblins were not bright creatures at the best of times. There was only one example of a goblin ever winning a science prize, and he turned out to be a genetic experiment who had entered himself into the competition.

This sonix bomb would strip away any higher brain functions and turn the goblins into marauding fire-breathing lizards. Foaly knew all of this because he had pitched a mini-version of the sonix bomb to the LEP as a crime deterrent, but the Council had refused grant aid because his device gave the wearer nosebleeds.

Police Plaza was eighty percent rubble now, with only the top story left clinging to the rock ceiling like a flat barnacle. The lower floors had collapsed onto the reserved parking spaces below, forming a rough rubble pyramid that steamed and sparked. Luckily, the covered bridge that led to the adjoining parking structure was still relatively intact. Foaly hurried across the bridge, trying not to see the gaps in the floor where a hoof could slip through, trying not to hear the tortured screech of metal struts as they twisted under the weight of their overload.

Don't look down. Visualize reaching the other side.

As Foaly ran, the bridge collapsed in sections behind him, until it felt like the plinking keys of a piano falling into the abyss. The automatic door on the other side was stuck on a kink in the rail, and it juddered back and forth, leaving barely enough room for Foaly to squeeze through and collapse, panting, on the fourth-story floor.

This is so melodramatic, he thought. Is this how things are for Holly every day?

Encouraged by the crash of masonry and the stink of burning cars, Foaly hurried across the lot to his van, which was parked in a prime spot near the walkway. The van was an ancient creak that could easily have been mistaken for a derelict vehicle instead of the chosen conveyance of the fairy responsible for most of the city's technological advancements. If a person did happen to know who the van belonged to, then that person might suppose Foaly had disguised the exterior to discourage potential carjackers. But no, the van was simply a heap of rust mites and should have been replaced decades ago. In the same way that many decorators never painted their own houses, Foaly, an expert in automobile advancements, did not care what he himself drove. This was a daily disadvantage, as the centaurmobile emitted noise output several decibels above regulation and regularly set off sonic alarms all over the city. Today, though, the van's antiquity was a definite advantage, as it was one of the few vehicles that could run independently of Haven's automated magnetic rail system and was actually fully functional.

Foaly beeped open the front loading doors and backed up to the cab, waiting for the extendable harness to buzz out and cradle his equine torso. The harness cinched around him, beeping all the while, then lifted the centaur backward into the cab. Once the beetle-wing doors had folded down, the van's sensors detected Foaly's proximity and started its own engines. It took

a few seconds to mount up and get going in this vehicle, but it would take a lot longer to try and climb into the automobile with six limbs and a tail, which some equinologists considered a seventh limb, or at least an appendage.

Foaly pulled a steering wheel out of its slot on the dash and put his hoof to the metal, screaming out of his parking spot.

“Home!” Foaly shouted into the nav system bot suspended on a gel string before his face. He had, in a moment of vanity, shaped the bot’s face in his own image.

“The usual route, handsome?” said the system bot, winking fondly at Foaly.

“Negative,” replied Foaly. “Ignore usual speed and safety parameters. Just get us there as quickly as possible. All normal behavioral restraints are lifted on my authority.”

If the bot had had any hands, it would have rubbed them. “I have been waiting a long time to hear that,” it said, and took over control of the vehicle.

Something was happening to the beautifully inlaid little box in Caballine’s hand. It seemed as though a tiny thundercloud was roiling inside there. The thing vibrated like a beehive, but there was absolutely no sound. But there was *something*, a feeling that set her teeth on edge and made her eyes water, as though invisible nails were being dragged down a mental blackboard.

Crazy, I know, but that’s how it feels.

She flung the box away from her, but not before the tiny thundercloud flowed from the container and coated her hand. The box rolled beneath the coffee table—a petrified giant flat toadstool that Holly had once called so *stereotypical it makes me want to scream*—and it lay there emitting whatever it was that had set Caballine’s nerves on edge.

“What is it, darling?” she turned to ask the little ARClight, but it lay dead on the floor, a tiny wisp of smoke curling from its head.

The box did that, she guessed. Whatever this thing was, it hadn’t come from Foaly, because it felt somehow *wrong*. And now the *wrongness* was on her hand. Caballine was not in any way a skittish centaur, but she felt a premonition of danger that almost buckled her legs.

Something bad is about to happen. Even worse than all the bad things

that have happened today.

Many fairies would have fallen to pieces under the weight of such ominous circumstances, but if the universe expected such a reaction from Caballine Wanderford Paddock Foaly, then the universe was about to be surprised, for one of the characteristics that had drawn Foaly to his bride-to-be was her fighting spirit. And she did not sustain this spirit with the power of positive thinking alone. Caballine had achieved the level of blue sash in the ancient centaurian martial art of Nine Sticks, which included the head and tail as weapons. She often worked out in the LEP gymnasium with Holly Short, and indeed had once accidentally kicked Holly through a rice-paper wall when the image of an old boyfriend had suddenly popped into her head.

Caballine trotted to a locked tall cupboard in the bedroom and instructed it to open. Inside was her blue sash, which she quickly draped across her chest. The sash would be of no practical use if attackers were on the way. What would help was the long whippy bamboo pole next to it, which whistled as it cut the air and could, in the right hands, skin the hide from a troll's back.

The texture of the pole against her palm soothed Caballine, to the point where she felt a little foolish standing there in full Nine Sticks regalia.

Nothing bad is going to happen. I'm just overreacting.

Then the front door exploded.

Foaly's navigation system drove like a maniac, cackling with a glee that Foaly could not remember programming into it. And even though Foaly was consumed with nightmarish visions of Caballine in the clutches of fire-breathing goblins, he could not help but take notice of the devastation that streaked by the window—clouds of thick smoke, and flares of orange and blue flame blurred by the van's manic speed. LEP officers picked through rubble and wreckage looking for survivors, and smoke pillars rose from a dozen familiar landmarks.

"Take it easy," he said, slapping the nav-bot. "I won't be much use to Caballine if I arrive dead."

"Chill, old dude," said the tiny bot-head. "It's not like you're going to be much use anyway. Caballine knows Nine Sticks. What are you going to do? Throw a keyboard?"

Old dude? thought Foaly, wishing now that he had never given the bot an experimental personality chip, wishing even more that the chip did not have his own personality. But the bot was right. What was he going to do? It would be tragic indeed if Caballine were killed trying to save him. Suddenly Foaly felt like an aquaphobic lifeguard. Was he bringing anything of use to this situation?

The nav-bot seemed to read his mind, which was impossible; but Foaly resolved to patent it just in case he had accidentally invented a telepathic robot.

“Play to your strengths, dude,” it said.

Of course, thought Foaly. My strengths. What are my strengths? And where are they?

They were, of course, in the back of the van, where he stored a thousand half-finished and quasi-legal experiments and replacement parts. When Foaly thought about it, he realized that there were things in his truck capable of blowing a hole in the time stream if they ever bumped together, so he had decided long ago not to think about it, as the alternative was to clean out his van.

“Keep driving,” he instructed the nav-bot, wriggling out of his harness and backing across the small bridge that linked the cab to the rear carriage. “I need to look in the back.”

“Mind your head, dude,” said the bot gleefully, a second before hurtling over a humpbacked bridge outside of a pixie dental care facility built in the shape of a giant molar.

That personality chip must be corrupted, thought Foaly. I would never be so reckless, and I would absolutely never call anyone “dude.”

When the front door exploded, Caballine’s reaction was fury. Firstly because the house’s front door was antique rosewood and had been responsibly sourced from Brazil, and secondly because the door had been open and only a moron would feel the need to blow up something that was already ajar. Now the door would have to be reconstituted, and it would never be the same, even if they could find all the splinters.

Caballine stormed into the lobby to find a crazed goblin slithering into the house on all fours, smoke leaking from its flat nostrils, its lizardlike head

thrashing from side to side as though there were a hornet in its skull.

“How dare you!” said Caballine, dealing the lizard-like creature a blow to the side of its head that literally knocked the goblin out of its skin, which it had been on the point of shedding.

Well, that was upsetting, she thought, believing the assault to be over, when a second goblin appeared in the blackened doorway, head weaving in the same disconcerting manner as the first. Two more began pawing at the window, and something began scrabbling inside the garbage disposal.

Don't tell me. Another goblin.

Caballine turned her back on the goblin in the doorway and dealt him a double-barreled kick with her hind legs that knocked a puff of smoke from his open mouth and sent him flying backward over the boundary wall as though yanked by a bungee cord. She simultaneously punctured holes in the window with two lightning jabs of her bamboo, dislodging the goblins from a windowsill that had just been painted. Through the cracked pane she saw dozens of goblins converging on the property and felt something close to real panic.

I hope Foaly doesn't come home, she thought, bending her knees in a fighter's stance. I don't think I can rescue us both.

Foaly rummaged around the van, looking for something, *anything*, that could save his beloved.

Even if I could call for help, he thought, everybody is up to their necks in one disaster or other. It's up to me.

The van was a jumble of clutter, the shelves piled high with robot casings, specimen jars, incubators, power sources, and bionic body parts.

But no weapons. Not one single gun.

He found a jar of bio-hybrid eyes, which glared at him, and a specimen jar full of some kind of liquid specimen that he could not remember collecting.

“Any luck?” asked the nav-bot from a gel speaker adhered to a wall panel.

“Not yet,” said Foaly. “How long till we get there?”

“Two minutes,” replied the bot.

“Can’t you shave a minute off that time?”

“I could, if I run over a few pedestrians.”

Foaly considered it. “No. Better not. Wasn’t there a plasma cannon back here somewhere?”

“No. You donated that to the orphanage.”

Foaly did not waste time wondering why he would have donated a plasma cannon to an orphanage but instead kept digging through the junk in the van.

If I had an hour I could assemble something, but two minutes?

Fiber optics. Inside-outers. Voodoo mannequins. Cameras.

Nothing useful.

At the very back of the van Foaly found an old obsolete lithium-ion magic battery that he should have drained years ago. He patted the large cylinder fondly.

We set off the famous time-stop at Fowl Manor with a series of you guys.

Foaly froze. A time-stop!

He could set off a time-stop, and everyone inside would be stuck there until the battery ran out.

But time-stops required complicated calculations and precise vectors. You couldn’t set off a time-stop in the suburbs.

Normally, no. But these were not normal circumstances.

It would need to be concentrated. Almost pure magic, with a diameter no wider than the property itself.

“I see you looking at that magic battery,” said the nav-bot. “You’re not thinking of setting off a time-stop, are you, dude? You need a few dozen permits before you can do that.”

Foaly synched the battery’s timer with the nav computer, something Holly couldn’t have done in a million years.

“No,” he said. “I’m not setting it off. You are.”

Caballine’s hide was scorched and there were bite marks on her hind legs, but she would not allow herself to give up. More than a dozen goblins surrounded her now, gnashing the air, their eyeballs rolling wildly, being

driven crazy by something. There were more on the roof, chewing their way through, and every window and door was a mass of wriggling bodies.

I never got to say good-bye, thought Caballine, determined to take down as many of these lizards as possible before they buried her under sheer numbers.

Good-bye, Foaly, I love you, she thought, hoping the sentiment would somehow reach him.

Then her husband crashed his van through the side of the house.

The nav-bot understood his instructions immediately.

“It’s an insane plan,” said the artificial intelligence. “But it’s what I would do.”

“Good,” said Foaly, settling himself into the passenger seat harness. “Because you’ll be doing it.”

“I love you, dude,” said the little bot, a gelatinous tear rolling down its cheek.

“Calm down, program,” said Foaly. “I’ll see you in a minute.”

Caballine didn’t really understand what happened next until her mind had time to flick through the images. Her husband’s work van jackknifed into the house, swatting half a dozen goblins. The driver’s door was open with its harness extended, and Caballine did not have time to register this before she was scooped up, backward, and dumped facedown into the hindquarter’s cradle.

“Hi, honey,” said Foaly, an attempt at jauntiness that was belied by the nervous sweat on his brow.

The van’s conduit section was torn asunder as the rear section braked and the front careened on through the opposite wall.

“My house!” said Caballine into the padded seating, as masonry thumped against the doors and sparks fizzled on the windshield.

Foaly had intended to manually steer the front section to a gradual halt a safe distance from the house, but battered vehicles are unpredictable, and this one insisted on flipping onto its side and skidding into the yard, dipping its wheel into the family compost heap, which contained several of Foaly’s ancestors.

The goblins were flummoxed for a moment; then their poor tortured senses picked up the hated sonic signature on Caballine's hand, and their heads turned toward the van's front section. There were so many goblins on the house now that it resembled one giant, green-scaled creature. Each goblin inflated its chest to hurl a fireball.

"Nice rescue. Shame it wasn't a total success," said Caballine. "But I appreciate the gesture."

Foaly helped her up. "Wait for it," he said.

Before a single fireball could be launched, a bolt of blue magic burst through the rear section of the van, shot twenty feet straight up, then mushroomed into a hemisphere of gelatinous ectoplasm that dropped neatly over the Foaly residence.

"I take it back," said Caballine. "That was a spectacular rescue."

Foaly had just sealed Caballine's hand inside a hazmat glove and assured the assembled neighbors that the emergency was past when the time-stop fizzled out, revealing a large group of docile goblins.

"Foaly!" shouted Caballine. "The blue force field is dead."

"Don't worry," said Foaly. "Your hand was driving them crazy, but I smothered the signal. We're safe now."

Caballine shielded her husband with her own body as the goblins wandered, dazed, from the ruins of her house. "They're still criminals, Foaly."

"They've done their time," said Foaly. "That was a concentrated time-stop. Almost a hundred percent pure. Five seconds for us was five years for them."

"So they're rehabilitated?" asked Caballine.

Foaly picked his way around the small fires and piles of rubble that were all that was left of his family home.

"As rehabilitated as they'll ever be," he said, guiding confused goblins toward the remaining posts of his front gate. "Go home," he told them. "Go to your families."

There wasn't much left of the van's rear section, just the bones of a chassis and some mangled tread. Foaly poked his head inside the door frame

and a voice said:

“Dude, I’ve missed you. It’s been a long time. How did we do?”

Foaly smiled and patted a coms box. “We did good,” he said, and then added, “Dude.”

CHAPTER 15

CRICKET ALERT

Fowl Manor

Myles had grown suddenly exhausted after his ordeal with Gobdaw and was tucked into bed with his laminated copy of the periodic table clutched to his chest.

“Possession can take a lot out of a person,” said Holly. “Believe me, I know. He’ll be fine in the morning.”

The three sat around Artemis’s desk like a war council, which in a very real way they were.

Butler took inventory. “We have two fighters and no weapons.”

Artemis felt he should object. “I can fight if need be,” he said, not even convincing himself.

“We have to presume the worst about Mulch,” continued Butler, ignoring Artemis’s limp objection. “Though he does have a way of spectacularly cheating death.”

“What’s our objective, specifically?” asked Holly. This question was directed at Artemis, the planner.

“The Berserker Gate. We need to shut it down.”

“What are we going to do? Write a harsh letter?”

“Normal weapons won’t penetrate Opal’s magic; in fact, she would absorb the energy. But if we had a super-laser, it might be enough to overload the gate. It would be like putting out a fire with an explosion.”

Holly patted her pockets. “Well, what do you know? I seem to have left my super-laser in another pocket.”

“Even you can’t build a super-laser in an hour,” said Butler, wondering

why Artemis was even bringing this up.

For some reason, Artemis looked suddenly guilty. “I might know where there is one.”

“And where would that be, Artemis?”

“In the barn, attached to my solar glider Mark Two.”

Now Butler understood Artemis’s embarrassment. “In the barn where we set up the gym? Where you are supposed to be practicing your self-defense routines?”

“Yes. That barn.”

In spite of the situation, Butler felt disappointed. “You promised me, Artemis. You said that you needed privacy.”

“It’s so boring, Butler. I tried, really, but I don’t know how you do it. Forty-five minutes punching a leather bag.”

“So you worked on your solar plane instead of keeping your promise to me?”

“The cells were so efficient that there was juice left over, so in my spare time I designed a lightweight super-laser and built it from scratch.”

“Of course. Who doesn’t need a super-laser in the nose of their family plane?”

“Please, girls,” said Holly. “Let’s put the BFF fight on hold for later, okay? Artemis, how powerful is this laser?”

“Oh, about as powerful as a solar flare,” said Artemis. “At its most concentrated it should have enough force to put a hole in the gate, without injuring anyone on the grounds.”

“I really wish you had mentioned this before.”

“The laser is untested,” said Artemis. “I would never unleash this kind of power unless there was absolutely no alternative. And from what Myles told us, we have no other card to play.”

“And Juliet doesn’t know about this?” asked Holly.

“No, I kept it to myself.”

“Good. Then we might have a chance.”

Butler outfitted them all in camouflage gear from his locker, and even forced

Artemis to endure the application of waxy stripes of black and olive makeup on his face.

“Is this really necessary?” asked Artemis, scowling.

“Completely,” said Butler, energetically applying the stick. “Of course, if you would stay here and allow me to go, then you and Myles could relax in your favorite loafers.”

Artemis put up with the dig, correctly assuming that Butler was still a little miffed about the super-laser deception.

“I must come along, Butler. This is a super-laser, not a point-and-shoot toy. An entire activation system is involved, and there is no time to teach you the sequence.”

Butler slung a heavy flak jacket over Artemis’s thin shoulders. “Okay. If you must go, then it’s my job to keep you safe. So, let’s make a deal: If you do not voice all the withering comments about the weight or uselessness of this jacket that are no doubt swirling in that big brain of yours, then I will not mention the super-laser episode again. Agreed?”

This jacket is really cutting into my shoulders, thought Artemis. And it’s so heavy that I could not outrun a slug.

But he said, “Agreed.”

Once Artemis’s security system assured them that their perimeter was clear, the group snuck in single file from the office, out of the kitchen, across the yard, and slipped into the alley between the stables.

There were no sentries, which Butler found strange. “I don’t see anything. Opal must know by now that we escaped her pirates.”

“She can’t afford to commit more troops,” whispered Holly. “The gate is her priority, and she needs to have as many Berserkers watching her back as possible. We are secondary at this point.”

“That will be her undoing,” gasped Artemis, already suffering under the weight of the flak jacket. “Artemis Fowl will never be *secondary*.”

“I thought you were Artemis Fowl the Second?” said Holly.

“That is different. And *I thought* we were on a mission.”

“True,” said Holly, then she turned to Butler. “This is your backyard, old friend.”

“That it is,” said Butler. “I’ll take point.”

They crossed the estate with cautious speed, wary of every living thing that crossed their path. Perhaps the Berserkers inhabited the very worms in the earth, or the oversized crickets that flourished on the Fowl grounds and sawed their wings in the moonlight, sounding like an orchestra of tiny carpenters.

“Don’t step on the crickets,” said Artemis. “Mother is fond of their song.”

The crickets, which had been nicknamed Jiminies by Dublin entomologists, were seen all year round only on the Fowl Estate, and they could grow to the size of mice. Artemis now guessed this was an effect of the magical radiation seeping through the earth. What he could not have guessed was that the magic had infected the crickets’ nervous systems with a degree of sympathy for the Berserkers. This did not manifest itself in bunches of crickets sitting in circles around miniature campfires telling stories of valiant elfin warriors, but in an aggression toward whatever threatened the Berserkers. Or, simply put: If Opal didn’t like you, then the crickets didn’t care for you much either.

Butler dropped his foot slowly toward a cluster of crickets, expecting them to move out of his path. They did not.

I should crush these little guys, he thought. I do not have time to play nice with insects.

“Artemis,” he called over his shoulder, “these Jiminies are giving me attitude.”

Artemis dropped to his knees, fascinated. “Look, they display no natural prudence whatsoever. It’s almost as if these crickets don’t like us. I should really conduct a study in the laboratory.”

The biggest bug in the cluster opened its lantern jaws wide, jumped high, and bit Artemis on the knee. Even though the bug’s teeth did not penetrate his thick combat pants, Artemis fell backward in shock and would have landed flat on his backside had Butler not scooped him up and set off running with his principal tucked under his arm.

“Let’s leave that lab study for later.”

Artemis was inclined to agree.

The crickets followed, pistoning their powerful hind legs to fling themselves into the air. They jumped as one, a bustling green wave that mirrored Butler's path exactly. More and more crickets joined the posse, pouring from dips in the landscape and holes in the earth. The wave crackled as it moved, so tightly were the crickets packed.

At least these ones can't fly, thought Butler, or there would be no escape.

Artemis found purchase and ran on his own two feet, wiggling out from Butler's grip. The big cricket was still clamped to his knee, worrying the combat material. Artemis slapped at it with his palm, and it felt like hitting a toy car. The cricket was still there, and now his hand was sore.

It was difficult even for Artemis to think in these circumstances, or rather it was difficult to pluck a sensible thought from the jumble zinging off his cranial curves.

Crickets. Murderous crickets. Flak jacket heavy. Too much noise. Too much. Insane crickets. Perhaps I am delusional again.

"Four!" he said aloud, just to be sure. "Four."

Butler guessed what Artemis was doing. "It's happening, all right. Don't worry, you're not imagining it."

Artemis almost wished that he were.

"This is serious!" he shouted over the sound of his own heart beating in his ears.

"We need to get to the lake," said Holly. "Crickets don't swim so well."

The barn was built on a hilltop overlooking a lake known as the Red Pool because of the way it glowed at sunset when viewed from the manor's drawing room bay window. The effect was spectacular, as though the flames of Hades lurked below fresh water. By day, a playground for ducks; but by night, the gateway to hell. The idea that a body of water could have a secret identity had always amused Artemis, and it was one of the few subjects on which he allowed his imagination free rein. Now the lake simply seemed like a safe haven.

I'll probably be dragged straight down by the weight of this flak jacket.

Holly crowded him from behind, elbowing him repeatedly in the hip.

"Hurry!" she said. "Get that glassy look off your face. Remember, there

are killer crickets after us.”

Artemis picked up his feet, trying to run fast like he had seen Beckett do so often—on a whim it seemed, as though running for half a day took no particular effort.

They raced across a series of garden plots that had been sectioned off with makeshift fences of shrub and posts. Butler barged through whatever blocked their way. His boots kicked new potatoes from their beds, clearing a path for Artemis and Holly. The crickets were not impeded by barriers, simply buzz-sawing through or flowing around with no discernible loss of pace. Their noise was dense and ominous, a cacophony of mutters. Scheming insects.

The lead crickets nipped at Holly’s boots, latching on to her ankles, grinding their pugnacious jaws. Holly’s instinct told her to stop and dislodge the insects, but her soldier’s sense told her to run on and bear the pinching. To stop now would surely be a fatal mistake. She felt them piling up around her ankles, felt their carapaces crack and ooze beneath her boots. It was like running on Ping-Pong balls.

“How far?” she called. “How far?”

Butler answered her by raising two fingers.

What was that? Two seconds? Twenty seconds? Two hundred yards?

They ran through the gardens and down the plowed hill toward the water’s edge. The moon was reflected in the surface like the white of a god’s eye, and on the far side was the gentle ski-slope rise of Artemis’s runway. The crickets were on them now, waist high for Holly. They were swarming from every corner of the estate.

We never had a cricket problem, thought Artemis. Where have they all come from?

They felt the bites on their legs like tiny burns, and running became next to impossible with a writhing skin of crickets coating each limb.

Holly went down first, then Artemis, both believing that this must surely be the worst possible way to die. Artemis had stopped struggling when a hand reached down through the electric buzzing and hauled him free of the morass.

In the moonlight he saw a cricket clamped to his nose, and he reached up to crush it with his fingers. The body crunched in his fist, and for the first

time Artemis felt the adrenaline rush of combat. He felt like squashing all of these crickets.

Of course it was Butler who had rescued him, and as he dangled from the bodyguard's grip, he saw Holly hanging from Butler's other hand.

"Deep breath," said Butler, and he tossed them both into the lake.

Five minutes later, Artemis arrived gasping at the other side minus one flak jacket, about which he felt sure Butler would have something to say—but it had been either ditch the jacket or drown, and there wasn't much point in being bulletproof at the bottom of a lake.

He was relieved to find that he was flanked by Holly and Butler, who seemed considerably less out of breath than he himself was.

"We lost the crickets," said Butler, causing Holly to break down in a splutter of hysterical giggles, which she stifled in her sopping sleeve.

"*We lost the crickets,*" she said. "Even you can't make that sound tough."

Butler rubbed water from his close-cropped hair. "I am Butler," he said, straight-faced. "Everything I say sounds tough. Now, get out of the lake, fairy."

It seemed to Artemis that his clothes and boots must have absorbed half the lake, judging by their weight as he dragged himself painfully from the water. He often noticed actors on TV ads exiting pools gracefully, surging from the water to land poolside, but Artemis himself had always been forced to climb out at the shallow end or to execute a sort of double flop that left him on his belly beside the pool. His exit from the lake was even less graceful, a combined shimmy-wiggle that would remind onlookers of the movements of a clumsy seal. Eventually Butler put him out of his misery with a helping hand beneath one elbow.

"Up we come, Artemis. Time is wasting."

Artemis rose gratefully, sheets of night-cold water sliding from his combat pants.

"Nearly there," said Butler. "Three hundred yards."

Artemis had long since given up being amazed at his bodyguard's ability to compartmentalize his emotions. By rights the three of them should have

been in shock after what they'd been through, but Butler had always been able to fold all that trauma into a drawer to be dealt with later, when the world was not in imminent danger of ending. Just standing at his shoulder gave Artemis strength.

"What are we waiting for?" Artemis asked, and he set off up the hill.

The chitter of the crickets receded behind them until it merged with the wind in the tall pines, and no other animal adversaries were encountered on the brief hunched jog up the runway. They crested the hill to find the barn unguarded. And why wouldn't it be? After all, what kind of strategist deserts a stronghold to hide out in a highly combustible barn?

Finally a touch of luck, Artemis thought. Sometimes being devious pays off.

They got lucky again inside the barn, where Butler recovered a Sig Sauer handgun from a coded lockbox bolted to the blind side of a rafter.

"You're not the only one with barn secrets," he said to Artemis, smiling as he checked the weapon's load and action.

"That's great," said Holly dryly. "Now we can shoot a dozen grasshoppers."

"Crickets," corrected Artemis. "But let's get this plane in the sky and shoot a big hole in Opal's plans instead."

The light aircraft's body and wings were coated with solar foil that powered the engine for liftoff. Once airborne, the plane switched between powered flight and gliding, depending on the directions from the computer. If a pilot were content to take the long way around and ride the thermals, then it was possible to engage the engine for takeoff only, and some trips could actually create a zero carbon footprint.

"That plane over there," said Butler. "Beyond the unused punch bag and the gleaming weights with their unworn handles."

Artemis groaned. "Yes, that plane. Now, can you forget about the weights and pull out the wheel blocks while I get her started?" he said, giving Butler something to do. "Let's leave the door closed until we are ready for takeoff."

"Good plan," said Holly. "Let me check inside."

She jogged across the barn, leaving muddy footprints in her wake, and

pulled open the plane's rear door.

The plane, which Artemis had named the *Khufu* after the pharaoh for whom a solar barge was built by the ancient Egyptians, was a light sports aircraft that had been radically modified by Artemis in his quest to design a practical green passenger vehicle. The wings were fifty percent longer than they had been, with micro-fine struts webbed above and below. Every surface, including the hubcaps, was coated in solar foil, which would recharge the battery in the air. A power cable ran from the *Khufu's* tail socket to the south-facing slope of the barn roof, so that the craft would have enough charge to take off whenever Artemis needed to make a test flight.

Holly's head emerged from the darkness of the interior.

"All clear," she said in a hushed tone, in case loud noises would break their streak of luck.

"Good," said Artemis, hurrying to the door, already running the startup sequence in his head. "Butler, would you open the doors as soon as I get the prop going?"

The bodyguard nodded, then kicked the white wedge of wood from under the forward wheel. Two more to go.

Artemis climbed into the plane and knew right away that something was wrong.

"I smell something. Juliet's perfume."

He knelt between the passenger seats, tugging open a metal hatch to reveal a compartment below. Thick cables thronged the box, and there was a rectangular space in the middle where something boxlike should have sat.

"The battery?" asked Holly.

"Yes," said Artemis.

"So we can't take off?"

Artemis dropped the hatch, allowing it to clang shut. Noise hardly mattered anymore.

"We can't take off. We can't shoot."

Butler poked his head into the plane. "Why are we making noise all of a sudden?" One look at Artemis's face was all the answer he needed.

"So, it's a trap. It looks like Juliet was keeping closer tabs on you than we thought." He pulled the Sig Sauer from his waistband. "Okay, Artemis,

you stay in here. It's time for the soldiers to take over.”

Butler's features then stretched in an expression of surprise and pain as a bolt of magic sizzled into the barn from outside, engulfing the bodyguard's head and torso, permanently melting every hair follicle on his head, and tossing him into the rear of the plane, where he lay motionless.

“It's a trap, all right,” said Holly, grimly. “And we walked straight into it.”

CHAPTER 16

A WARNING SHOT

MULCH DIGGUMS was not dead, but he had discovered the limits of his digestive abilities: that it *was* possible to eat too many rabbits. He lay on his back in the half-collapsed tunnel, his stomach stretched tight as the skin of a ripe peach.

“Uuuugh,” he moaned, releasing a burst of gas that drove him three yards farther along the tunnel. “That’s a little better.”

It took a lot to put Mulch off a food source, but after this latest gorging on unskinned rabbit, he didn’t think he would be able to look at one for at least a week.

Maybe a nice hare, though. With parsnips.

Those rabbits had just kept coming, making that creepy hissing noise, hurling themselves down his gullet like they couldn’t wait for their skulls to be chomped. Why couldn’t all rabbits be this reckless? It would make hunting a lot easier.

It wasn’t the rabbits themselves that made me queasy, Mulch realized. It was the Berserkers inside them.

The souls of the Berserker warriors could not have been very comfortable inside his stomach. For one thing, his arms were covered in rune tattoos, as dwarfs had a fanatical fear of possession. And, for another, dwarf phlegm had been used to ward off spirits since time immemorial. So, as soon as their rabbit hosts died, the warrior spirits transitioned to the afterlife with unusual speed. They didn’t move calmly toward the light so much as sprint howling into heaven. Ectoplasm flashed and slopped inside Mulch’s gut, giving him a bad case of heartburn and painting a sour scorch in the lower bell curve of his tummy.

After maybe ten more minutes of self-pity and gradual deflation, Mulch felt ready to move. He experimentally waggled his hands and feet, and when his stomach did not flip violently, he rolled onto all fours.

I should get away from here, he thought. Far, far away from the surface before Opal releases the power of Danu, if there even is such a thing.

Mulch knew that if he was anywhere in the vicinity when something terrible happened, the LEP would try to blame him for the terrible happening.

Look, there's Mulch Diggums. Let's arrest him and throw away the access chip. Case closed, Your Honor.

Okay, maybe it wouldn't happen exactly like that, but Mulch knew that whenever there were accusing fingers to be pointed, they always seemed to swivel around to point in his direction and, as his lawyer had once famously said, *Three or four percent of the time my client was not a hundred percent accountable for the particular crime he was being accused of, which is to say that there were a significant number of incidents where Mr. Diggums's involvement in the said incidents was negligible even if he might have technically been involved in wrongdoing adjacent to the crime scene on a slightly different date than specified on the LEP warrant.* This single statement broke three analytical mainframes and had the pundits tied up in knots for weeks.

Mulch grinned in the dark, his luminous teeth lighting the tunnel.

Lawyers. Everyone should have one.

"Aw, well," he said to the worms wriggling on the tunnel wall. "Time to go."

Farewell, old friends. We gave it our best try, but you can't win 'em all. Cowardice is the key to survival, Holly. You never understood that.

Mulch sighed long and hard, with a hitching burp at the end, because he knew he was kidding himself.

I can't run away.

Because there was more at stake here than his own life. There was life itself. A lot of it, about to be snuffed out by a crazy pixie.

I am not making any heroic promises, he consoled himself. I'm just taking a quick peek at the Berserker Gate to see just how far up the creek we really are. Maybe Artemis has already saved the day, and I can retire to my

tunnels. And perhaps take a few priceless masterpieces with me for company. Don't I deserve that?

Mulch's stomach grazed the tunnel floor as he moved, still swollen and making strange, animalistic noises.

I have enough energy for twenty feet of tunneling, he realized. No more, or my stomach walls will split.

As it turned out, Mulch did not have to swallow a single bite of tunnel clay. When he looked up, he saw a pair of glowing red eyes looking back at him. There were scything tusks poking from the dark beneath the night eyes, and a shaggy, dreadlocked head arranged around them.

"Gruffff," said the troll, and all Mulch could do was laugh.

"Really?" he said. "After the day I've had."

"Gruffff," said the troll again, and it lumbered forward, with paralyzing venom dripping from its tusks.

Mulch went through fear, past panic, and around to anger and outrage.

"This is my home, troll!" he shouted, shunting forward. "This is where I live. You think you can take a dwarf? In a tunnel?"

Gruff did indeed think this and increased his pace, even though the walls constricted his natural gait.

He's a lot bigger than a rabbit, thought Mulch, and then the two collided in a blur of ivory, flesh, and blubber, with exactly the sound you would expect to hear when a lean killing machine hits a corpulent, gassy dwarf.

In the barn, Artemis and Holly were in a pretty desperate situation. They were down to two bullets in a gun that Holly could barely lift and Artemis couldn't hit a barn door with, in spite of the fact that there was one close by.

They hunched in the back of Artemis's solar plane, basically waiting for the Berserkers to launch their attack. Butler lay unconscious across the rear seats with smoke literally coming out of his ears, a symptom that had never been professionally diagnosed as a good thing.

Holly cradled Butler's head, pressing her thumbs gently into his eye sockets, and forced her last watery squib of magic into the bodyguard's cranium.

"He's okay," she panted. "But that bolt stopped his heart for a while. If

it hadn't been for the Kevlar in his chest..."

Holly didn't finish her sentence, but Artemis knew that his bodyguard had escaped death by a whisker for the umpteenth time, and *umpteenth* was the absolute limit of the number of extra lives handed out by the universe to any one person.

"His heart will never be the same, Artemis. No more shenanigans. He's going to be out for hours," said Holly, checking the fuselage's porthole. "And the Berserkers are getting ready to make their move. What's the plan, Arty?"

"I had a plan," said Artemis numbly. "And it didn't work."

Holly shook his shoulder roughly, and Artemis knew her next step would be to slap him in the face. "Come on, Mud Boy. Snap out of it. Plenty of time for self-doubt later."

Artemis nodded. This was his function. He was the planner.

"Very well. Fire a warning shot. They cannot know how many bullets we have left, and it might give them pause, buy me a moment to think."

Holly's rolled eyes spoke clearly, and what they said was: *A warning shot? I could have thought of that myself, genius.*

But this was no time to knock Artemis's shrinking confidence, so she hefted Butler's Sig Sauer and opened the window a slit, resting the barrel on the frame.

This gun is so big and unwieldy, she thought. I can hardly be blamed if I accidentally hit something.

In siege situations, it was standard practice to send in a scout. *Send in* being a nicer way of saying *sacrifice*. And the Berserkers decided to do just that, ordering one of the Fowl hunting dogs to literally sniff around. The large gray hound flitted through the moonlight streaming in through the barn door, planning to lose itself in the shadows.

Not so fast, thought Holly, and fired a single shot from the Sig, which hit the dog like a hammer blow high in its shoulder, sending it tumbling back outside to its comrades.

Oops, she thought. I was aiming for the leg.

When the plane finished vibrating and the gunshot echo faded from Artemis's cranium he asked, "Warning shot, correct?"

Holly felt a little guilty about the dog, but she could thrash that out in

therapy if any of them survived. “Oh, they’re warned, all right. You have your minute to think.”

The dog exited the barn a lot faster than it had come in. Bellico and her magical coterie were more than a little jealous when they saw a soul drift from the canine corpse, smile briefly, then disappear in a blue flash, on its way to the next world.

“We don’t need to enter,” said Salton the pirate, sliding the barn door closed. “All we need to do is stop them coming out.”

Bellico disagreed. “Our orders are to kill them. We can’t do that from here, can we? And mayhap there’s something in there my host, Juliet, doesn’t know about. Another tunnel, or a hot-air balloon. We go in.”

Opal had been very specific when Bellico had presented her with the information about the *Khufu*.

“My host protects the Fowl children,” Bellico had said. “The boy Myles is very inquisitive and followed Artemis to his hilltop workshop. So Juliet followed the boy. There is a sky craft in there, powered by the sun. Perhaps a weapon of some sort.”

Opal had paused in her spell casting. “Artemis has no choice but to go for the weapon. Take a team and remove the craft’s battery, then wait for them to enter the workshop.” Opal clasped Bellico’s forearm and squeezed until her nails bit into the flesh. A slug of power crawled from Opal’s heart, along her arm and into Bellico. Bellico felt instantly nauseous and knew that the magic was poison.

“This is black magic and will eat into your soul,” said Opal, matter-of-factly. “You should release it as soon as possible. There’s enough there for one bolt. Make it count.”

Bellico held her own hand before her face, watching the magic coil around her fingers.

One bolt, she thought. Enough to take down the big one.

Holly hovered anxiously around Artemis. He was in his thinking trance and hated to be interrupted, but there was bustling under the barn door and shadows crisscrossing in the moonlight, and her soldier sense told her that their refuge was about to be breached.

“Artemis,” she said urgently. “Artemis, do you have anything?”

Artemis opened his eyes and brushed back a hank of black hair from his forehead.

“Nothing. There is no rational plan that will save even one of us if Opal succeeds in opening the second lock.”

Holly returned to the window. “Well then, first in gets another warning shot.”

Bellico ordered the archers to line up outside the barn’s sliding door.

“When the door opens, fire whatever you’re carrying into the machine. Then we rush it. The elf will have time for two shots, no more. And if any of us happens to be killed, well then, that’s our good fortune.”

The Chinese warriors could not speak, sealed as their mummified remains were inside enchanted clay sepulchers; but they nodded stiffly and drew their massive bows.

“Pirates,” called Bellico, “stand behind the archers.”

“We are not pirates,” said Salton Finnacre sulkily, scratching his femur. “We are *inhabiting* pirates. Isn’t that right, me hearties?”

“Arrr, Cap’n,” said the other pirates.

“I admit it,” said Finnacre sheepishly. “That sounded fairly piratelike. But it bleeds through. Two more days in this body, and I could sail a brig singlehanded.”

“I understand,” said Bellico. “We will be with our ancestors soon. Our duty will be done.”

“Woof,” said the remaining hound with feeling, barely resisting his host’s urge to sniff other people’s personal areas. Bellico wrapped Juliet’s fingers around the door handle, testing it for weight.

“One more glorious charge, my warriors, and the humans are forever vanquished. Our descendants can forever live in peace.”

The moment buzzed with impending violence. Holly could sense the Berserkers psyching themselves up.

It’s down to me, she realized. I have to save us.

“Okay, Artemis,” she said brusquely. “We climb to the rafters. Perhaps

it will take the Berserkers time to find us. Time that you can spend planning.”

Artemis peered over her shoulder, through the porthole.

“Too late,” he said.

The barn door trundled open on oiled casters, and six implacable Chinese clay warriors stood silhouetted in the moonlit rectangle.

“Archers,” said Holly. “Lie flat.”

Artemis seemed dazed by the utter collapse of his plans. He had acted *predictably*. When had he become so predictable?

Holly saw that her words were not penetrating Artemis’s skull, and she realized that Artemis had two major weaknesses: One, he was physically hamstrung not only by his hamstrings but also by a lack of coordination that would have embarrassed a four-year-old; and two, he was so confident in the superiority of his own intellect that he rarely developed a plan B. If plan A proved to be a dud, there was no fallback.

Like now.

Holly hurled herself at Artemis, latching on to his torso and knocking him flat in the narrow aisle. A second later, she heard the command from outside.

“Fire!”

It was Juliet’s voice. Ordering the murder of her own brother.

As battle veterans know all too well, the urge to look at the instrument of your own death is almost overpowering. Holly felt that pull now, to sit up and watch the arrows as they arced toward their targets. But she resisted it, forcing herself down, squashing herself and Artemis into the walkway so the corrugated steel pressed into their cheeks.

Four-foot-long arrows punched through the fuselage, rocking the plane on its gear and embedding themselves deep in the seating upholstery. One was so close to Holly that it actually passed through her epaulette, pinning her to the seat.

“D’Arvit,” said Holly, yanking herself free.

“Fire!” came the command from outside, and instantly a series of whistles filled the air.

It sounds like birds, thought Holly.

But it wasn't birds. It was a second volley. Each arrow battered the aircraft, destroying solar panels; one even passed clean through two portholes. The craft was driven sideways, tilting onto the starboard wing.

And yet again the command came. "Fire!" But she heard no whistling noise this time. Instead there was a sharp crackling.

Holly surrendered to her curiosity, clambering up the slanted floor to the porthole and peeping out. Juliet was lighting the terra-cotta soldiers' arrows.

Oh, thought Holly. That kind of fire.

Bellico squinted into the barn's interior and was pleased to see the airplane keeled over. Her host's memory assured her that this craft had indeed flown through the sky using the energy of the sun to power its engine, but Bellico found this difficult to believe. Perhaps the human's dreams and recollections were becoming intertwined, so that to Bellico daydreams and figments would seem real.

The sooner I am out of this body, the better, she thought.

She wound a torch from a hank of hay and lit the tip with a lighter taken from the human girl's pocket.

This lighter is real enough, she thought. And not too far removed in its mechanics from a simple flint box.

A straw torch would not burn for long, but long enough to light her warriors' arrows. She walked along the ranks, briefly touching the arrowheads that had been soaked in fuel from a punctured gasoline can.

Suddenly the hound raised its sleek head and barked at the moon.

Bellico was about to ask the dog what the matter was, but then she felt it too.

I am afraid, she realized. Why would I be afraid of anything when I long for death?

Bellico dropped the torch as it was burning her fingers, but, in the second before she stamped on its dying embers, she thought she saw something familiar storming across the field to the east. An unmistakable lurching shape.

No, she thought. That is not possible.

"Is that...?" she said, pointing. "Could that be?"

The hound managed to wrap its vocal cords around a single syllable that wasn't too far out of its doggy range. "Troll!" it howled. "Trooooooolll."

And not just a troll, Bellico realized. A troll and its rider.

Mulch Diggums was clamped to the back of the troll's head with a hank of dreadlocks in each hand. Beneath him the troll's shoulder muscles bunched and released as it loped across the field toward the barn.

Loped is perhaps the wrong word, as it implies a certain slow awkwardness, but while the troll did appear to shamble, it did so at incredible speed. This was one of the many weapons in a troll's considerable arsenal. If the intended prey noticed a troll coming from a long way off, seemingly stumbling along, it thought to itself: *Okay, yeah I see a troll, but he's like a million miles away, so I'm just gonna finish off chewing this leaf, then—BAM*—the troll was chewing off the prey's hind leg.

Bellico, however, had often seen the troll-rider brigade in action, and she knew exactly how fast a troll could move.

"Archers!" she yelled, drawing her sword. "New target. Turn! Turn!"

The terra-cotta army creaked as they moved, red sand sifting from their joints. They were slow, painfully slow.

They are not going to make it, Bellico realized, and then she had a grasping-at-straws moment. *Perhaps that troll and its rider are on our side.*

Sadly for the Berserkers, the troll rider was most definitely not on their side, and the troll was just doing what he was told.

Gruff did indeed make a fearsome spectacle as he emerged from night shadows into the pale moonlight bathing the field. Even for a troll, he was a massive specimen, more than nine feet tall, with his bouncing dreadlocks giving the illusion of another foot or two. His heavy-boned brow was like a battering ram over glittering night eyes. Two vicious tusks curved up from a pugnacious jaw, beads of venom twinkling at the pointy ends. His shaggy humanoid frame was cabled with muscle and sinew, and his hands had the strength to make dust of small rocks and big heads.

Mulch yanked on the troll's dreadlocks, instinctively resurrecting an age-old troll-steering technique. His granddad had often told stories around the spit-

fire of the great troll riders who had rampaged across the countryside doing whatever they felt like, and nobody could even catch them to argue.

The good old days, his granddad used to say. We dwarfs were kings. Even the demons would turn tail when they seen a mounted dwarf comin' over the hill atop a sweat-steamin' troll.

This doesn't feel like a good day, thought Mulch. This feels like the end of the world.

Mulch decided on a direct approach rather than pussyfooting around with battle tactics, and he steered Gruff directly into the throng of Berserkers.

"Don't hold back!" he shouted into the troll's ear.

Bellico's breath caught in her throat.

Scatter! she wanted to shout to her troops. *Take cover!*

But the troll was upon them, smashing terra-cotta warriors with scything swipes of its massive arms, knocking them over like toy soldiers. The troll kicked the dog into the lower atmosphere and sideswiped Bellico herself into a water barrel. In seconds, several pirates were reduced to a dog's dinner, and even though Salton Finnacre managed to jab a sword into Gruff's thigh, the massive troll lumbered on, seemingly unhindered by the length of steel sticking out of his leg.

Mulch's toes located the nerve clusters between Gruff's ribs, and he used them to steer the troll into the barn.

I am a troll rider, the dwarf realized with a bolt of pride. I was born to do this, and steal stuff, and eat loads.

Mulch resolved to find a way of combining these three pursuits if he made it through the night.

Inside the barn, the plane lay balanced on a wheel and wing tip, with arrows piercing its body. Holly's face was pressed to the glass, her mouth a disbelieving *O*.

I don't know why she's surprised, thought Mulch. She should be used to me rescuing her by now.

Mulch heard the clamor of ranks re-forming behind him, and he knew it was only a matter of heartbeats before the archers launched a salvo at the troll.

And as big as my mount is, even he will go down with half a dozen arrows puncturing his vitals.

There was no time to open the glider door and scoop up its three passengers, so Mulch yanked on the dreadlocks, dug in his toes, and whispered in the troll's ear, hoping that his message was getting through.

Inside the solar plane, Holly used the few moments before all hell would surely break loose to hustle a dazed Artemis into the pilot's seat. She strapped herself in beside him.

"I'm flying?" asked Artemis.

Holly flip-flapped her feet. "I can't reach the pedals."

"I see," said Artemis.

It was a banal yet necessary conversation, as Artemis's piloting skills were soon to be called into use.

Gruff shouldered the plane upright, then put his weight behind it, heaving the light craft toward the open doorway. The plane hobbled forward on damaged gear, lurching with each rotation.

"I did not foresee any of these events," said Artemis through clattering teeth, more to himself than to his copilot. Holly placed both hands on the dash, to brace herself against an impact toward which they were rolling at full speed.

"Wow," said Holly, watching arrows thunk into the nose and wings. "You didn't foresee a troll-riding dwarf pushing your plane down the runway. You must be losing your touch, Artemis."

He tried to connect himself to the moment, but it was too surreal. Watching the Berserker soldiers grow larger through the double frames of windshield and barn doorway made the entire thing seem like a movie. A very realistic 3-D movie with vibro-chairs, but a movie all the same. This feeling of detachment coupled with the old Artemis Fowl slow reflexes almost cost him his life as he sat dreamily watching a Berserker long-arrow arcing toward his head.

Luckily Holly's reactions were stellar, and she managed to punch Artemis in the shoulder with enough force to knock him sideways to the limit of his seat belt. The arrow punctured the windshield, making a surprisingly small hole, and thunked into the headrest exactly where Artemis's vacant face

would have been.

Suddenly, Artemis had no problem *connecting to the moment*.

“I can air-start the plane,” he said, flicking switches on the dash. “If we get off the ground at all.”

“Doesn’t that require coordination?” asked Holly.

“Yes, split-second timing.”

Holly paled. Relying on Artemis’s coordination was about as sensible as relying on Mulch’s powers of abstinence.

The plane battered its way through the Berserkers, decapitating a terracotta warrior. Solar panels tinkled and cracked, and the landing gear buckled. Gruff kept pushing, ignoring various wounds that now gushed with blood.

Bellico rallied her troops and hurried in pursuit, but none could match the troll’s pace except the hound, who latched on to Mulch’s back, trying to dislodge him.

Mulch was insulted that a dog would interfere in what was possibly the most valiant rescue attempt ever, so he locked its head in the crook of one elbow and shouted into the animal’s face.

“Give it up, Fido! I am invincible today. Look at me, riding a troll, for heaven’s sake. How often do you see that anymore? Never! That’s how often. Now, you have two seconds to back off, or I am going to have to eat you.”

Two seconds passed. The dog shook its head, refusing to back off, so Mulch ate him.

It was, he would later tell his fellow dwarf fugitive Barnet Riddles, proprietor of Miami’s Sozzled Parrot bar, a terrible waste to spit out half a dog, but it’s difficult to look heroic with a mutt’s hindquarters hanging out of yer mouth.

Seconds after the live hound disagreed with Mulch to his face, the dead dog disagreed with his stomach. It may have been the Berserker soul that caused the onset of indigestion, or it may have been something the dog ate before something ate him—either way, Mulch’s innards were suddenly cramped by a giant fist wearing a chain-mail glove.

“I gotta trim,” he said through gritted teeth.

If Gruff had realized what Mulch Diggums was about to do, he would have run screaming like a two-year-old pixette and buried himself

underground till the storm had passed, but the troll did not speak *grunted Dwarfish* and so followed the last command given, which had been: *Push downhill*.

The solar plane picked up speed as it ran down the clay ramp with the Berserkers in quick pursuit.

“We are not going to make it,” said Artemis, checking the instruments. “The gear is shot.”

The runway’s end curved before them like the end of a gentle ski jump. If the plane went off with insufficient speed, it would simply plummet into the lake, and they would be sitting ducks alongside the actual ducks that were probably inhabited by Berserkers and would peck them to death. Artemis was almost reconciled to the fact that he was going to die in the immediate future, but he really did not want his skull to be fractured by the bill of a possessed mallard. In fact, *Death by aggressive aquatic bird* had just rocketed to number one on Artemis’s *Least Favorite Ways to Die* list, smashing the record-breaking dominance of *Death by dwarf gas*, which had haunted his dreams for years.

“Not ducks,” he said. “Please, not ducks. I was going to win the Nobel Prize.”

They could hear commotion from underneath the fuselage: animal grunting and buckling metal. If the plane did not take off soon, it was going to be shaken to pieces. This was not a strong craft, stripped back as it was to increase the power-to-weight ratio necessary for sustainable flight.

Outside the solar plane, Mulch’s entire body was twisted in a cramped treeroot of pain. He knew what was going to happen. His body was about to react to a combination of stress, bad diet, and gas buildup by instantaneously jettisoning up to a third of his own body weight. Some more disciplined dwarf yogis can invoke this procedure at will and refer to it as the Once a Decade Detox, but for ordinary dwarfs it goes by the name Trimming the Weight. And you do not want to be in the line of fire when the weight is being trimmed.

The plane reached the bottom of the slope with barely enough momentum to clear the ramp.

Water landing, thought Artemis. Death by ducks.

Then something occurred. A boost of power came from somewhere. It

was as if a giant forefinger had flicked the plane forward into the air. The tail rose, and Artemis fought the pedals to keep it down.

How is this happening? Artemis wondered, staring befuddled at the controls, until Holly punched his shoulder for the second time in as many minutes.

“Air start!” she yelled.

Artemis sat bolt upright. *Air start! Of course.*

The solar plane had a small engine to get the craft off the ground, and after that the solar panels kicked in; but without a battery the engine could not even turn over, unless Artemis hit the throttle at the right time, before the plane began to lose momentum. This might buy them enough time to catch a thermal for a couple of hundred feet, enough to clear the lake and outfly the arrows.

Artemis waited until he sensed the plane was at the apex of its rise, then opened the throttle wide.

Bellico and her remaining troops ran hell-for-leather down the runway, hurling any missiles in their arsenal after the plane. It was a bizarre situation to be involved in, even for a resurrected spirit occupying a human body.

I am chasing a plane being pushed down a runway by a troll-riding dwarf, she thought. Unbelievable.

But nevertheless it was true, and she'd best believe it, or her quarry would escape.

They cannot go far.

Unless the vehicle flew as it was designed to.

It won't fly. We have destroyed the battery.

This thing flies without power once it is airborne. My host has seen this with her own eyes.

Her good sense told her that she should stop and allow the plane to crash into the lake. If the passengers did not drown, then her archers could pick off the swimmers. But good sense was of little use on a night such as this, when ghost warriors roamed the earth and dwarfs rode once more on the backs of trolls, so Bellico decided she must do what she could to stop this plane from leaving the ground.

She increased her pace, outstripping the other Berserkers, using her long human legs to their full advantage, and hurled herself at the troll's midsection, grabbing tufts of gray fur with one hand and the pirate sword with the other.

Gruff howled but kept pushing.

I am attacking a troll, she thought. I would never do this with my own body.

Bellico glanced upward through the tangle of limbs and saw the whole of the moon, gleaming above. Beneath that, she saw a dwarf in considerable discomfort, changing his grip to hold on to the plane's body, flattening himself to the fuselage.

"Go," the dwarf instructed the troll. "Back to your cave." That is not good, thought Bellico. Not good at all.

The plane swept up the liftoff ramp into the air. At the same moment, Gruff obeyed his master and released his grip, sending himself and Bellico skipping across the lake like skimmed stones, which was a lot more painful than it sounds. Gruff had a coat of fur to protect his hide, but Bellico covered most of the distance on a face that would have water burns for several months.

Overhead, Mulch could hold on no longer. He released a jetstream of watery fat, wind, and half-digested foodstuff that gave the solar plane a few extra feet of lift, just enough to send it soaring out over the lake.

Bellico surfaced just in time to be clocked on the forehead by what could have been a dog's skull.

I will not think about that, she thought, and swam back toward the shore.

Artemis pumped the throttle for a second time, and the plane's engine caught. The single nose propeller chugged, jerked, then spun faster and faster until its blades formed a continuous transparent circle.

"What happened?" Artemis wondered aloud. "What was that noise?"

"Wonder later," said Holly, "and fly the plane now."

This was a good idea, as they were by no means out of the woods yet. The engine was running, it was true, but there was no power in the solar battery, and they could only glide for a limited time at this altitude.

Artemis pulled the stick back, climbing to a hundred feet, and as the wider world spread out below them, the magnitude of the devastation wrought by Opal's plan became obvious.

The roads into Dublin were lit by engine fires fed by fuel tanks and combustible materials. Dublin itself was blacked out, except for patches of orange lighting where generators had been patched up or bonfires lit. Artemis saw two large ships that had collided in the harbor, and another beached like a whale on the strand. There were too many fires to count in the city itself, and smoke rose and gathered like a thundercloud.

Opal plans to inherit this new earth, Artemis thought. I will not let her.

And it was this thought that pulled Artemis's mind back into focus and set him scheming on a plan that could stop Opal Koboï for the final time.

They flew over the lake, but it was not graceful flight—in fact, it was more like prolonged falling. Artemis wrestled with controls that seemed to fight back as he struggled to keep their descent as gradual as possible.

They crested a row of pines and flew directly over the Berserker Gate, where Opal Koboï labored in a magical corona. Holly used the flyover as a chance to recon their enemy's forces.

Opal was surrounded by a ring of Berserkers. There were pirates, clay warriors, and other assorted beings in the ring. The estate walls beyond were patrolled by more Berserkers. There were mostly animals on the walls—two foxes, and even some stag, clopping along the stone, sniffing the air.

No way in, thought Holly. And the sky is beginning to lighten.

Opal had given herself till sunrise to open the second lock.

Perhaps she will fail and the sunlight will do our work for us, thought Holly. But it was unlikely that Opal had made a mistake in her calculations. She had spent too long in her cell obsessing over every detail.

We cannot rely on the elements. If Opal's plan is to fail, we must make it fail.

Beside her, Artemis was thinking the same thing, the only difference being that he had already laid the foundations of a plan in his mind.

If Artemis had voiced his plan at that moment, Holly would have been surprised. Not by the plan's genius—she would expect no less—but because of its selflessness. Artemis Fowl planned to attack with the one weapon Opal

Koboi would never suspect him of possessing: his humanity.

To deploy this stealth torpedo, Artemis would have to trust two people to be true their own personality defects.

Foaly would need to be as paranoid as he had always been.

And Opal Koboi's rampant narcissism would need to have run so wild that she would not be able to destroy humanity without her enemies at hand to witness her glory.

Finally Holly could not sit and watch Artemis's clumsy attempts at aviation any longer.

"Give me the stick," she said. "Give it full flaps when we hit the ground. They're going to be on us pretty quickly."

Artemis relinquished control without objection. This was not the time for macho argument. Holly was undeniably ten times the pilot he would ever be, and also several times more macho than he was. Artemis had once seen Holly get into a fistfight with another elf who said her hair looked pretty, because she thought he was being sarcastic, as she was sporting a fresh crew cut on that particular day.

Holly didn't go on many dates.

Holly nudged the stick with the heel of her hand, lining up the plane with the manor's pebble driveway.

"The driveway is too short," said Artemis.

Holly knelt on the seat for a better view. "Don't worry. The landing gear will probably totally collapse on impact anyway."

Artemis's mouth twisted in what could have been an ironic smile or a grimace of terror.

"Thank goodness for that. I thought we were in real trouble."

Holly struggled with the stick as though it were resisting arrest. "Trouble? Landing a crippled aircraft is just a normal Tuesday morning for us, Mud Boy."

Artemis looked at Holly then and felt a tremendous affection for her. He wished that he could loop the past ten seconds and study it at a less stressful time so he could properly appreciate how fierce and beautiful his best friend was. Holly never seemed so vital as when she was balancing on the fine line

between life and death. Her eyes shone and her wit was sharp. Whereas others would fall apart or withdraw, Holly attacked the situation with a vigor that made her glow.

She is truly magical, thought Artemis. Perhaps her qualities are more obvious to me now that I have decided to sacrifice myself.

Then he realized something. *I cannot reveal my plans to her. If Holly knew, she would try to stop me.*

It pained Artemis that his last conversation with Holly would be by necessity peppered with misdirection and lies.

For the greater good.

Artemis Fowl, the human who had once lied as a matter of course, was surprised to find that in this instance, lying *for the greater good* did not make him feel any better about it.

“Here we go,” shouted Holly over the howl caused by the wind shear. “Shankle your bootbraces.”

Artemis tightened his seat belt. “Bootbraces shankled,” he called.

And not a millisecond too soon. The ground seemed to rush up to meet them, filling their view, blocking out the sky. Then, with a tremendous clatter, they were down, being showered by blurred stones. Long-stemmed flowers fell in funereal bouquets across the windshield, and the propeller buckled with an earsplitting shriek. Artemis felt his seat belt bite into both shoulders, arresting his leftward lean, which was just as well, because his head would have naturally come to rest exactly where a prop blade had thunked through the seat rest.

The small craft lost its wings sliding down the avenue, then flipped onto its roof, coming to a shuddering halt at the front steps.

“That could have been a lot worse,” said Holly, smacking her seat-belt buckle.

Indeed, thought Artemis, watching blood on the tip of his nose seem to drip upward.

Suddenly something that looked like a giant, angry peach slid down what was left of the windshield, buckling the anti-shatter glass and coming to a wobbly stop on the bottom step.

Mulch made it, thought Artemis. Good.

Mulch literally crawled up the manor steps, desperate for food to replace his jettisoned fat. “Can you believe that supermodels do that every month?” he moaned.

Artemis beeped the door and the dwarf disappeared inside, clattering down the main hallway toward the kitchen.

It was left to Artemis and Holly to lug Butler the length of the steps, which in the bodyguard’s limp, unconscious state was about as easy as lugging a sack of anvils.

They had made it to the third step when an uncommonly bold robin redbreast fluttered down and landed on Butler’s face, hooking its tiny claws over the bridge of the bodyguard’s nose. This in itself would have been surprising enough, but the note clamped in the bird’s beak made the little creature altogether more sinister.

Artemis dropped Butler’s arm. “That was quick,” he said. “Opal’s ego doesn’t waste any time.”

Holly tugged the tiny scroll free. “You were expecting this?”

“Yes. Don’t even bother reading it, Holly. Opal’s words are not worth the paper they are written on, and I can tell that’s inexpensive paper.”

Of course Holly did read the note, and her cheeks glowed brighter with every word.

“Opal requests the pleasure of our company for the great cleansing. If we turn ourselves in, just me and you, then she will let your brothers live. Also she promises to spare Foaly, when she is declared empress.”

Holly balled the note and flicked it at the robin redbreast’s head. “You go and tell Opal no deal.”

The bird whistled aggressively and flapped its wings in a way that seemed insulting.

“You want to take me on, Berserker?” said Holly to the tiny bird. “Because I may have just crawled out of a plane crash, but I can still kick your tail feathers.”

The redbreast took off, its birdsong trailing behind it like a derisive chuckle as it flew back to its mistress.

“You’d better fly, Tweety!” Holly shouted after it, allowing herself an unprofessional outburst, and it did make her feel marginally better. Once the bird had disappeared over the tree line, she returned to her task.

“We must hurry,” she said, hooking her arm under Butler’s. “This is a trick. Opal will have more Berserkers on our tails. We’re probably being watched by...worms...right now.”

Artemis did not agree. “No. The gate is paramount now. She will not risk more soldiers hunting for us. But we must hurry all the same. Dawn is only a couple of hours away, and we have time for only one more assault.”

“So we’re ignoring that note, right?”

“Of course. Opal is toying with our emotions for her own gratification. Nothing more. She wishes to place herself in a position of power, emotionally.”

The steps were coated with seasonal ice crystals, which twinkled like movie frost in the moonlight. Eventually Artemis and Holly succeeded in rolling Butler over the threshold and onto a rug, which they dragged underneath the stairs, making the hefty bodyguard as comfortable as possible with some of the throw pillows that Angeline Fowl liked to strew casually on every chair.

Holly’s back clicked as she straightened. “Okay. Death cheated one more time. What’s next, brainiac?”

Holly’s words were glib, but her eyes were wider than usual, with desperation in the whites. They were so close to unthinkable disaster that it seemed even Artemis, with his knack of pulling last-minute miraculous rabbits out of his hat, could not possibly save humanity.

“I need to think,” said Artemis simply, quick-stepping up the stairs. “Have something to eat and maybe take a nap. This will take ninety minutes at least.”

Holly clambered after him, struggling up the human-size steps.

“Wait! Just wait,” she called, overtaking Artemis and looking him in the eye from one step up. “I know you, Artemis. You like to play your genius card close to your chest until the big reveal. And that’s worked out for us so far. But this time you need to let me in. I can help. So, tell me the truth, do you have a plan?”

Artemis met his friend’s gaze and lied to her face.

“No,” he said. “No plan.”

CHAPTER 17

LAST LIGHT

Police Plaza, Haven City, the Lower Elements

The LEP had several operatives working undercover in human theme parks around the world, because humans did not even bat an eyelash at the sight of a dwarf or fairy as long as they were standing beside a roller coaster or animatronic unicorn. Foaly had once reviewed footage from a ride in Orlando that the conspiracy theorists on the Council were certain was a training base for a secret government group of fairy killers. In this particular ride, the customers were put on a subway train that drove into an underground station. A station that was promptly subjected to every natural disaster known to man or fairy. First an earthquake split the tunnel, then a hurricane whipped up a storm of debris, then a flood pulled vehicles down from above, and finally an *honest-to-gods* lava stream lapped the windows.

When Foaly finally got back to his office, he looked down on the streets of Haven from the fourth floor of the Police Plaza building, and it occurred to him that his beloved city reminded him of that Orlando subway station. Totally trashed, almost beyond recognition.

But my city cannot be reassembled by the touch of a button.

Foaly pressed his forehead against the cool glass and watched the emergency services work their magic.

Paramedic warlocks treated the wounded with rapid bursts of magic from their insulated mitts. Firegnomes cut through girders with buzz-lasers, clearing paths for ambulances, and structural engineers rappelled from rock hooks, plugging fissures with flexi-foam.

It's funny, thought Foaly. I always thought that the humans would destroy us.

The centaur placed his fingertips on the glass. *No. We are not destroyed. We will rebuild.*

Any new tech had exploded, but there was plenty of outdated stuff that had not been recycled due to budget cuts. Most of the fire department vehicles were operational, and none of the backup generators had been refitted in the past five years. Commander Kelp was overseeing a clean-up operation on a scale never before seen in Haven. Atlantis had been hit just as badly, if not worse.

At least the dome was shored up. If that had imploded, the death count would have been huge. Not human huge, but pretty big all the same.

All because one psychotic pixie wanted to rule the world.

A lot of families lost someone today. How many fairies are sick with worry right now?

Foaly's thoughts turned to Holly, stranded on the surface, trying to deal with this situation without LEP support.

If she's even alive. If any of them are alive.

Foaly had no way of knowing. All of their long-range communication was out, as most of it was piggybacked on human satellites that had by now been reduced to space garbage.

Foaly tried to comfort himself with the thought that Artemis and Butler were with his friends.

If anyone can thwart Opal, it's Artemis.

And then he thought, *Thwart?* I'm using words like *thwart* now. Opal would love that. It makes her sound like a supervillain.

Mayne clopped up beside him.

"Mak dak jiball, Oncle. We've got something on your lab screens."

Foaly's nephew had no difficulty speaking Unicorn, but the boy had some difficulty getting to the point.

"They're big screens, Mayne. Usually, there's something on them."

Mayne scraped his forehoof. "I know that, but this is something interesting."

"Really. Lots of interesting stuff going on today, Mayne. Can you specificate?"

Mayne frowned. “*Specificate* means to identify the species of a creature. Is that what you mean?”

“No. I meant can you be more specific?”

“About what species?”

Foaly scraped a hoof, scoring the tiling. “Just tell me what’s so interesting on the screen. We’re all busy here today, Mayne.”

“Have you been drinking sim-coffee?” his nephew wondered. “Because Aunty Caballine said you get a little jittery after two cups.”

“What’s on the screen?” thundered Foaly, in what he thought of as his majestic tone, but which was actually a little shrill.

Mayne reared back a few paces, then gathered himself, wondering why people always reacted to him in this way.

“You remember those ARClights you sent to Fowl Manor?”

“Of course I remember. They’re all dead. I send them, Artemis finds them. It’s a little game we play.”

Mayne jerked a thumb over his shoulder, toward the screen, where the blank square used to be.

“Well, one of those suckers just came back to life. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Foaly aimed a kick at Mayne, but the youngster had already trotted out of range.

Fowl Manor

Artemis locked his office door behind him and gave the perimeter cams and sensors a cursory glance to make sure they were safe for the moment. It was as he expected. The only activity on the estate was over a mile away, where the Martello tower used to be and where the Berserker Gate now poked from Opal’s impact crater. As a precaution he set the alarm to the SIEGE setting, which featured deterrents not available on standard house systems, such as electrified windowpanes and flash bombs in the locks. Then again, Fowl Manor hadn’t been a standard house since Artemis had decided to keep his kidnapped fairy in the basement.

Once he was satisfied they were locked down, Artemis opened a coded

drawer in his desk and pulled out a small lead box. He tapped the lid with a nail and was satisfied to hear a skittering inside.

Still alive, then.

Artemis slid the box open and inside, latched on to a three-volt battery, was a tiny bio-cam dragonfly. One of Foaly's little toys, which were usually shorted out in Artemis's regular bug sweeps; but he had decided to keep this one and feed it, in case he ever needed a private line through to Foaly. He had hoped to use this camera to announce the success of their assault on the Berserker Gate, but now the little bug would convey a more somber message.

Artemis shook the bug onto his desk, where it skittered around for a while before its face recognition software identified Artemis as the prime target and decided to focus in on him. The tiny lenses in its eyes buzzed almost inaudibly, and a couple of stemmed microphones extended like an ant's antennae.

Leaning in close, Artemis began to speak softly so he could not possibly be overheard, even though his own sensors assured him that his was the only warm body of significant mass within twenty feet.

“Good morning, Foaly. I know there is not so much as an atom of Koboï technology in this little mutation, so in theory it can transmit, and I hope you are still alive to receive the transmission. Things are bad up here, my friend, very bad. Opal has opened the Berserker Gate and is working on the second lock. If she succeeds, a wave of coded earth magic will be released to destroy humanity utterly. This, in my opinion, is a bad thing. To stop this disaster from happening I need you to send me a couple of items in one of your drone mining eggs. There is no time for permits and committees, Foaly. These items must be in Fowl Manor in less than two hours, or it will be too late. Get what I need, Foaly.”

Artemis leaned in even closer to the tiny living camera and whispered urgently.

“Two things, Foaly. Two things to save the world.”

And he told the little bug what he needed and where exactly he needed them sent.

Police Plaza, Haven City, the Lower Elements

The color drained from Foaly's face.

Koboi was working on the second lock.

This was catastrophic—though there were many fairies in Haven who would dance in the streets to celebrate the eradication of humanity, but no rational ones.

Two items.

The first wasn't a problem. It was a *toy*, for heaven's sake.

I think I have one in my desk.

But the second. The second.

That is a problem. A major problem.

There were legal issues and moral issues. If he even mentioned it to the Council, they would want to form a taskforce and a subcommittee.

What Artemis asked was technically possible. He did have a prototype mining egg in the testing area. All he had to do was program the coordinates into the navigation system, and the egg would speed toward the surface. Built to transport miners from cave-ins, the egg could withstand huge pressures and fly at the speed of sound three times around the world. So, Artemis's time limit shouldn't be a problem.

Foaly chewed a knuckle. Should he do what Artemis asked? Did he want to?

The centaur could ask himself questions until time had run out, but there was really only one question that mattered.

Do I trust Artemis?

Foaly heard breathing behind him and realized that Mayne was in the room.

"Who else has been in here?" he asked the technician.

Mayne snorted. "In here? You think the alpha fairies are going to hang around dork central when there's a big old crisis going down? No one has been in here, and no one has seen this video. Except me."

Foaly paced the length of his office. "Okay. Mayne, my young friend, how would you like a full-time job?"

Mayne squinted suspiciously. "What would I have to do?"

Foaly grabbed item number one from his desk drawer and headed for the

door.

“Just your usual,” he replied. “Hang around the lab and be useless.”

Mayne made a copy of Artemis’s video just in case he was being implicated in some kind of treason.

“I could do that,” he said.

CHAPTER 18
SOUL SURVIVOR

Fowl Manor; Ninety-Eight Minutes Later

Artemis was making final preparations in his office, updating his will and trying to master his feelings, tamping down a flat gray sky of sadness that threatened to cloud his resolve. He knew that Dr. Argon would advise him against bottling up his emotions as it would lead to psychological scarring in the long term.

But there will be no long term, Doctor, he thought wryly.

After so many adventures, Artemis felt he should have known that things never turned out exactly as planned, but still he felt surprised at the finality of this step he was being forced to take—and also that he was willing to even consider taking it.

The boy who kidnapped Holly Short all those years ago would never have entertained the notion of sacrificing himself.

But he was no longer that boy. His parents were restored to him, and he had brothers.

And dear friends.

Something else Artemis had never anticipated.

Artemis watched his hand shake as he signed his last will and testament. How valid many of his bequests were in this new age, he was not sure. The banking system was almost definitely irretrievably damaged, as were the world's stock exchanges. So there went the stocks, bonds, and shares.

All that time spent accumulating wealth, Artemis thought. What a waste.

Then:

Come, now. You are simply being maudlin. You love gold almost as

much as Mulch Diggums loves chicken. And, given the chance, you would probably do the same again.

It was true. Artemis didn't believe in deathbed conversions. They were far too opportunistic. A man must be what he is and take whatever judgments were forthcoming on the chin.

If there is a Saint Peter, I will not argue with him at the Pearly Gates, he promised his subconscious, though Artemis knew that, if his theory was correct, he could be stuck on this plane as a spirit, just as the Berserkers were.

I can be a supernatural bodyguard to Myles and Beckett.

This notion gave Artemis comfort and made him smile. He realized that he was not at all afraid, as if what he was about to attempt were a simulation in a role-playing game rather than an actual course of action.

This changed when Artemis sealed the will in an envelope and propped it against the desk lamp. He stared at the document, feeling the finality in the moment.

No going back now.

And then the fear dropped on him like a ton weight, pinning him to the office chair. He felt a block of lead solidify in his stomach, and suddenly his limbs seemed grafted on and out of his control.

Artemis took several deep breaths just to stop himself from throwing up, and gradually his calm returned.

I had always imagined that there would be time for good-byes. A moment for meaningful words with those I love.

There was no time. No time for anything but action. The fear had passed, and Artemis was still set on his course.

I can do it, he realized. I can think with my heart.

Artemis pushed his oxblood chair back on its casters, clapped his knees once, and stood to face his ordeal.

Holly burst into the office with murder in her eyes.

"I saw what came out of the wine cellar, Artemis."

"Ah," said Artemis. "The egg arrived."

"Yes, it arrived. And I had a look inside."

Artemis sighed. "Holly, I am sorry you saw. Mulch was supposed to

hide it.”

“Mulch is my friend too, and I told him you would try to pull something. He was digging himself a last-minute escape tunnel when the egg came in on autopilot. Mulch figures this is the something you are trying to pull.”

“Holly, it’s not what you think.”

“I know what you’re planning. I figured it out.”

“It seems radical, I know,” said Artemis. “But it’s the only way. I have to do this.”

“You have to do it?!” said Holly, incensed. “Artemis Fowl makes choices for everyone, as usual.”

“Perhaps, but this time I am justified by circumstance.”

Holly actually pulled her gun. “No. Forget it, Artemis. It’s not happening.”

“It has to happen. Perhaps in time, with resources, I could develop an alternate strategy....”

“Develop an alternate strategy? This is not a corporate takeover we’re talking about, Artemis. It’s your life. You intend to go out there and kill yourself. What about Butler?”

Artemis sighed. It pained him to leave Butler unconscious, ignorant of the plan, especially as he knew that his faithful bodyguard would forever consider himself a failure.

Collateral damage. Just as I shall be.

“No. I can’t tell him, and neither will you...”

Holly interrupted with a wave of her gun. “No orders from you, Mr. Civilian. I am the officer in charge. And I am categorically vetoing this tactic.”

Artemis sat in his chair, resting his face in his hands.

“Holly, we have thirty minutes before sunrise, then I die anyway. Butler dies, and Juliet. My family. Almost everyone I love will be gone. All you’re doing is making sure that Opal wins. You would not be saving anyone.”

Holly stood beside him, and her touch was light at his shoulder. Artemis realized suddenly that elves had a signature odor.

Grass and citrus. Once, I would have filed that information.

“I know you don’t like it, Holly, my friend, but it’s a good plan.”

Holly’s fingers traveled to Artemis’s neck, and he felt a slight tingle.

“I don’t like it, Arty,” she said. “But it is a good plan.”

The tranquilizer pad took a few seconds to work, and then Artemis found himself keeling over onto the Afghan rug, his nose parting the fibers of a tree-of-life motif. The drug numbed his mind, and he could not fathom exactly what was happening.

“I’m sorry, Artemis,” said Holly, kneeling beside him. “Opal is one of my people, so this is my sacrifice to make.”

Artemis’s left eye rolled in its socket and his hand flapped weakly.

“Don’t hate me forever, Arty,” whispered Holly. “I couldn’t bear that.”

She took his hand and squeezed it tightly. “I am the soldier, Artemis, and this is a job for a soldier.”

“You make a good point, Holly,” said Artemis, clearly. “But this is my plan and, with all due respect, I am the only one who can be trusted to execute it.”

Holly was confused. Just a moment ago, Artemis had been on the verge of unconsciousness, and now he was lecturing her in his usual supercilious way.

How?

Holly pulled back her hand and saw a small adhesive blister on her palm.

He drugged me! she realized. That sneaky Mud Boy drugged me.

Artemis stood and led Holly to the leather sofa, laying her down on the soft cushions.

“I thought Foaly might tattle, so I took an adrenaline shot to counteract your sedative.”

Holly fought the fog clouding her mind.

“How could you...? How?”

“Logically you have no right to be angry. I simply followed your lead.”

Tears filled Holly’s eyes, spilling down her cheeks as the truth called to her from far away, across a misty chasm.

He is really going through with it.

“No,” she managed.

“There is no other way.”

Holly felt the hollowness of dread sour her stomach.

“Please, Arty,” she mumbled. “Let me...” but she said no more as her lips had turned to slack rubber.

Artemis nearly broke—she could see it in his mismatched eyes, one human, one fairy—but then he stepped away from the couch and breathed deeply.

“No. It has to be me, Holly. If the second lock is opened, then I will die, but if my plan succeeds, then all fairy souls inside the magical corona will be drawn to the afterlife. *Fairy* souls. My soul is human, Holly, don’t you see? I don’t intend to die, and there is a chance that I may survive. A small chance, granted. But a chance nonetheless.” Artemis rubbed his eye with a knuckle. “As a plan, it is far from perfect, but there is no alternative.”

Artemis made Holly comfortable with cushions. “I want you to know, my dear friend, that without you, I would not be the person I am today.” He leaned in close and whispered, “I was a broken boy, and you fixed me. Thank you.”

Holly was aware that she was crying because her vision was blurred, but she could not feel the tears on her face.

“Opal expects you and me,” she heard Artemis say. “And that is exactly what she will get.”

It’s a trap! Holly wanted to scream. *You are walking into a trap.*

But even if Artemis could hear her thoughts, Holly knew there was no turning him from his path. Just as she figured Artemis had left the room, he reappeared in her field of vision, a pensive look on his face.

“I know you can still hear me, Holly,” he said. “So I would ask one last favor of you. If Opal outwits me and I don’t make it out of that crater, I want you to tell Foaly to power up the chrysalis.” He leaned down and kissed Holly’s forehead. “And give him that from me.”

Then the teen genius left, and Holly could not even turn her head to watch him go.

Opal knew that the ranks of her warriors were depleted, but it didn’t matter;

she had reached the final level of the Berserker Gate's second lock. Satisfaction flushed through her system in a buzz that set sparks jumping from the tips of her ears.

"I need peace," she called to whatever Berserker was guarding her flank. "If anyone comes close, kill them." She hurriedly amended this order to: "Except the human Fowl, and his pet LEP captain. Do you understand me?"

Oro, in the body of Beckett, understood well enough, but he wished the fairy bonds gave him the wiggle room to suggest that their leader forget her personal vendetta. However, Bruin Fadda's rules were explicit: Total obedience to the fairy who opens the gate.

We should hunt them down, he wanted to say. If we can capture these last few humans, then there is no need to open the second lock.

Opal turned and screamed into his face, spittle flying. "I said, do you understand me?"

"I do," said Oro. "Kill anyone, except Fowl and the female."

Opal tapped his cute button nose. "Yes, exactly. Mommy is sorry for raising her voice. Mommy is stressed beyond belief. You would not believe the brain cells Mommy is expending on this thing."

Say *Mommy* one more time, thought Oro, and bonds or no bonds...

The most Oro could do against the grip of the fairy bond was scowl slightly and bear the stomach cramps, but the scowling had no effect, as Opal had already turned back to her task, a corona of black magic shimmering around her shoulders.

The final tumbler in Bruin Fadda's enchanted lock was the warlock himself. Bruin had interred his own soul in the rock in much the same spiritual fashion as the Berserkers had been preserved in the ground.

As Opal ran her fingers over the rock's surface, the druid's face appeared in the stone, roughly etched but recognizable as elfin.

"Who wakes me from my slumbers?" he asked in a voice of rock and age. "Who calls me back from the brink of eternity?"

Oh, please, thought Opal. *Who calls me back from the brink of eternity?* Is this the kind of troll dung I am going to have to put up with just to wipe out humanity?

"It is I, Opal Koboi," she said, playing along. "From the house of Koboi.

High Queen of the fairy families.”

“Greetings, Opal Koboi,” said Bruin. “It is good to see the face of another fairy. So we are not yet extinct.”

“Not yet, mighty warlock, but even as we speak, the humans approach the gate. Haven is threatened. We must open the second lock.”

The rock ground like a millstone as Bruin frowned. “The second lock? That is indeed a momentous request. You would bear the guilt for this action?”

Opal used the penitent face she had developed for parole hearings. “I would bear it, for the People.”

“You are indeed brave, Queen Opal. The pixies were ever noble, in spite of their stature.”

Opal was prepared to let the *stature* remark pass, because she liked the sound of *Queen Opal*. Also, time was a-wasting. In less than an hour the sun would rise and the full moon would pass, and the chances of maintaining this little army for another day, even with the humans chasing their own tails, were pretty slim.

“Thank you, mighty Bruin. Now, the time has come for your answer.”

The warlock’s frown deepened. “I must consult. Are my Berserkers by your side?”

This was unforeseen. “Yes. Captain Oro is at my shoulder. He is in total agreement with me.”

“I would confer with him,” said the stone face.

This Bruin character was really pushing Opal’s buttons. A second ago it was all *Queen Opal*, and now he wanted to consult the help?

“Mighty Bruin, I don’t really think there is any need to consult with your soldiers. Time grows short.”

“I would confer with him!” thundered Bruin, and the scored grooves of his face glowed with a power that shook Opal to her core.

Not a problem, she thought. Oro is bonded to me. My will is his will.

Oro stepped forward. “Bruin, comrade. I had thought you gone to the next life.”

The stone face smiled, and he seemed to have sunlight instead of teeth. “Soon, Oro Shaydova. I liked your old face better than this young one,

though I can see your soul beneath.”

“A soul that aches to be released, Bruin. The light calls to us all. Some of my warriors have lost their wits, or close to it. We were never meant to be this long in the ground.”

“That time of deliverance is at hand, my friend. Our work is almost done. So, tell me, are the People yet under threat?”

“We are. Queen Opal speaks the truth.”

Bruin’s eyes narrowed. “But you are bonded, I see.”

“Yes, Bruin. I am in thrall to the queen.”

Bruin’s eyes flashed white in the stone. “I release you from your bonds so that we may speak freely.”

Not good, thought Opal.

Oro’s shoulders slumped, and it seemed as though every one of his years was written on Beckett’s face.

“The humans have weapons now,” said Oro, and it was strange to see the words coming from a mouth full of milk teeth. “They seem miraculous to me. In this young one’s memory I have seen that, without us to hunt readily, they kill each other by the thousands. They destroy the earth and have annihilated several thousand species.”

The stone face grew troubled. “Have they not changed?”

“They are more efficient than we remember, that is all.”

“Should I open the second lock?”

Oro rubbed his eyes. “This I cannot answer for you. It is true that Queen Opal has sabotaged their efforts, but already they mass against us. The gate has been assaulted twice, with two of our own among the attackers. An elf and a dwarf, both cunning adversaries.”

The stone face sighed, and white light flowed from its mouth. “Always have there been traitors.”

“We cannot hold on much longer,” admitted Oro. “Some of my warriors have already been called to Danu’s side. The world is in chaos and, if the humans attack the gate tomorrow, there will be none to defend it. With their new weapons, perhaps they will find a way to dismantle the second lock.”

Opal was quietly delighted, and if she could have clapped her tiny hands without seeming unqueenly, she would have. Oro was convincing this craggy

idiot better than she ever could.

“The People wither and die without sunlight,” she added with a poker face. “Soon we will disappear altogether. Suffering is our daily ritual. We must ascend.”

Oro could only agree with this. “Yes. We must ascend.”

Bruin ruminated for a long moment and his stony features grated as he thought.

“Very well,” he said, finally. “I shall open the lock, but yours is the final choice, Queen Opal. When the end is in sight, then you must choose. Your soul shall bear the consequences, as mine already does.”

Yes, yes, yes, thought Opal, barely concealing her delighted eagerness.

“I am prepared for this responsibility,” she said somberly. And though she could not see it, Oro rolled his eyes behind her, all too aware that Opal did not have the People’s interests at heart. But her motivations were of little importance as the end result, the *extinction of humanity*, would be the same.

Bruin’s features were suddenly submerged in a pool of bubbling magma that bled into the rock to reveal two sunken handprints. Opal’s original key, and a fresh one glowing a deep bloodred.

“Choose selflessly,” said Bruin’s voice from deep within the stone. “Prudence will close the gate entirely, releasing the souls and destroying the path forever. Desperation will summon the power of Danu and wipe the humans from the face of our land. Fairies shall walk the earth again.”

Handprint B it is, thought Opal happily. I have always found desperation a wonderful motivator.

Now that the climax had actually arrived, Opal paused for a thrilling moment to savor it.

“This time it is impossible for me to lose,” she said to Oro. “Mommy’s gonna press the big button.”

Oro would have pressed the button himself just to stop Opal referring to herself as *Mommy*, but alas, only the fairy who opened the gate could activate the second lock.

Opal wiggled her fingers. “Here we go. Mommy’s ready.”

Then a voice called from the lip of the crater.

“The human is surrendering himself. And he’s brought the elf.”

Until that second, Opal had not realized that this moment was not quite perfect. But now it would be.

“Bring them to me,” she commanded. “I want them to see it coming.”

Artemis Fowl dragged a hooded figure along the ground, heels digging grooves in the earth. When they arrived at the crater that had been blasted by Opal’s arrival, one of the pirates nudged Artemis, and he went tumbling down the incline, his face slapping the dirt with each revolution. The second figure skidded beside him, and it seemed almost coordinated when they rolled to the foot of the Berserker Gate. They made a bedraggled, beaten pair. The second figure landed face up. It was Holly Short. Obviously the elf had not come willingly.

“Oh, my,” said Opal, giggling behind her fist. “Poor dears. How pathetic.”

Opal felt proud of herself that she still had some sympathy in her for others.

I actually feel bad for these people, she realized. Good for me.

Then Opal remembered how Artemis Fowl and Holly Short had been responsible for her years in maximum security confinement, and what she had been forced to do to secure her own release, and her *feeling bad for those people* evaporated like morning dew.

“Help them up,” Oro ordered Juliet, who was squatting to one side, eating a bloody rabbit.

“No!” said Opal shrilly. “Search the Mud Boy for weapons, then let them crawl to my feet. Let the boy beg for mankind. I want this one with blood on his knees and tears of despair on his face.”

The fairy spirits sensed that the end was near and soon their souls would finally be released from duty and granted peace. So they gathered at the base of the Berserker Gate in their borrowed bodies, forming the sealed magic circle. They watched as Artemis hefted Holly painfully up the stairs, his back bent with the effort.

I wish I could see his face, thought Opal. See what this is costing him.

Holly’s frame was limp as she bumped along the steps, and one leg dangled off the tower’s edge. She seemed small and frail, and her breathing

was ragged. Opal allowed herself to imagine what Fowl had been forced to inflict on the elf in order to subdue her.

I turned them on themselves, she thought. The ultimate victory. And they did it for nothing, the fools.

Artemis reached the plateau and dropped Holly like a butcher's sack. He turned to Opal, hatred written large on his normally impassive features.

"Here we are, *Your Majesty*," he said, spitting the title. "I am surrendering myself, as ordered, and I have forced Holly to do the same."

"And I am so glad to see you, Artemis. So very glad. This makes everything simply perfect."

Artemis leaned, elbows on knees, panting for breath, blood dripping from his nose. "Holly said that you would never keep your word, but I tried to assure her that there was a chance at least, and so long as there was a chance we had no choice. She disagreed, and so I was forced to sedate my dearest friend." Artemis made eye contact with the pixie. "Is there a chance, Opal?"

Opal laughed shrilly. "A chance? Oh gods, no. There was never a chance. I love you, Artemis. You are too funny." She wiggled her fingers and sparks danced.

The color drained from Artemis's face, and his hands shook from effort and anger.

"Don't you care about the lives you take?"

"I don't want to kill *everybody*. But either humans or fairies have to go, so that I can lead the others. I decided on your group because I already have quite a lot of support belowground. There's a secret Web site, and you'd be amazed at some of the registered names."

The remaining Berserkers gazed up from the crater, swaying slightly, muttering prayers to the goddess Danu. Two pirates suddenly dropped, clattering to the ground in a rattle of bones.

"My children are failing," said Opal. "Time for Mommy to send them to heaven. Bellico, move the pesky boy genius back a little. It's not likely that Artemis Fowl will actually launch a physical attack, but he does have a knack for destroying my beautiful plans."

Juliet tossed Artemis backward into the dirt. No emotion showed on her

face; she was simply unable to take any other course of action.

“Should I kill the Mud Boy?” she asked dispassionately.

“Absolutely not,” said Opal. “I want him to see. I want him to feel the ultimate despair.”

Artemis rolled to his knees. “Humans are no threat to you, Opal. Most of us don’t even know fairies exist.”

“Oh, they do now. Our shuttleports are all wide open without their shields. I have revealed our existence to the Mud People, so now there is no choice but to eliminate them. It’s simple logic.”

Juliet placed a foot on Artemis’s back, flattening him to the earth. “He is dangerous, my queen. And if the elf traitor wakes, she could harm you.”

Opal pointed at the terra-cotta warriors. “You restrain the elf, and have those moving statues hold the boy. Mommy wishes to do a little grandstanding. It’s clichéd, I know, but after this I’ll probably have to be regal and selfless in public.”

Juliet lifted Holly by the scruff of the neck, easily hefting her aloft. Two Chinese warriors pinioned Artemis between them, holding him powerless in their grips of baked clay, with only his hands and feet mobile.

He can do nothing, thought Opal, satisfied.

“Bring them here,” she commanded. “I want them both to see me cleanse the planet.”

Artemis struggled ineffectually, but Holly’s head lolled in its hood, which was a little annoying for Opal, as she would have preferred to see the elf wide awake and terrified.

Opal positioned herself by the raised dais, tapping her fingers on the stone like a concert pianist. She worked on the Berserker Gate as she spoke, dipping her hands into the rock, which became molten where she touched.

“Humans had magic once,” she said. Perhaps she should gag Artemis’s smart mouth in case he contaminated her buoyant mood with some of his snide observations. Though by the vacant look on this Mud Boy’s face, the *snide* had been beaten out of him.

“That’s right. Humans wielded magic almost as well as demons. That’s why Bruin Fadda put so many hexes on this lock. His reasoning being that if any human grew powerful enough to decipher the enchantments, then Bruin

had no choice but to unleash the power of Danu, for the good of the People.” Opal smiled fondly at the Berserker Gate. “It looks simple now, like a child’s toy,” she said. “Just two handprints on a rock table. But the computations I had to work out. Foaly could never have managed it, I can tell you. That ridiculous centaur has no idea what it took to solve this puzzle: enchanted runes in several dimensions, quantum physics, magic math. I doubt there are four people in the world who could have brought that old fool Bruin back to life. And I had to do it all mentally. Without screens or paper. Some of it telepathically, through my younger self. You know, I didn’t even lose my memories when she died, and I thought I would. Strange, isn’t it?”

Artemis did not reply. He had retreated into bruised sulky silence.

“So here’s how it works,” said Opal brightly, as though explaining a math problem to her kindergarten group. “If I choose the first handprint, then I close the gate forever and all fairy souls inside the circle are released—except mine, of course, as I am protected by black magic. But if I choose the scary red hand, then the power of Danu is unleashed, but on humans only. It’s a pity we won’t see too much from here, but at least I can watch you die and imagine the magic’s effect on everyone else.”

Artemis wrenched one arm free of the clay warrior’s grip, tearing his sleeve and a layer of flesh. Before anyone could react, he placed his own hand in the Berserker Gate’s first lock.

Of course nothing happened, aside from Opal barking with laughter.

“You don’t understand, stupid boy. Only I can choose. Not you, not that pathetic centaur, Foaly, not your little elf friend. Only Opal Koboi. That is the whole point. She who opens the lock controls the gate. It is coded right down to my very DNA.” Opal’s tiny face grew purple with self-importance and her pointed chin shook. “I am the messiah. And I will shed blood so that the People may worship me. I will build my temple around this silly gate that leads nowhere and they can parade school tours past to learn about me.”

Artemis had a single strand of defiance left in him.

“I could close it,” he grunted. “Given a few minutes.”

Opal was nonplussed. “You could...you could close it? Weren’t you listening? Didn’t I make it simple enough? No one can close it but me.”

Artemis seemed unimpressed. “I could figure it out. One more hour, ten minutes even. Holly is a fairy, she has magic. I could have used her hand and

my brain. I know I could. How difficult could it be if you managed it? You're not even as smart as Foaly."

"Foaly!" screamed Opal. "Foaly is a buffoon. Fiddling around with his gadgets when there are entire dimensions left unexplored."

"I apologize, Holly," said Artemis formally. "You warned me, and I wouldn't listen. You were our only chance, and I tricked you."

Opal was furious. She skirted the Chinese warriors to where Juliet stood holding Holly, whose head was dangling.

"You think this ridiculous *thing* could ever have accomplished what I have accomplished?"

"That is Captain Holly Short of the Lower Elements Police," said Artemis. "Show some respect. She beat you before."

"This is not *before*," said Opal emphatically. "This is now. The end of days for humanity." She grabbed Holly's hand and slapped it vaguely in the area of the handprint on the Berserker Gate. "Oh, look at that. The gate is not closing. Holly Short has no power here." Opal laughed cruelly. "Oh, poor, pretty Holly. Imagine, if only your hand would activate the gate, then your suffering could end right now."

"We could do it," mumbled Artemis, but his eyes were closing, and it seemed as though he had lost faith in himself. His free hand tapped a distracted rhythm on the stone. The human's mind had finally snapped.

"Ridiculous," said Opal, calming herself. "And here I am, getting flustered by your claims. You vex me, Artemis, and I will be glad when you are dead."

Two things happened while Opal was ranting at Holly. The first thing was that Opal had a series of thoughts:

Holly's hand seems very small.

Opal realized that she hadn't closely examined the elf since she'd appeared at the crater's rim. Either she'd been lying down, or Artemis had shielded her body with his own.

But her face. I saw the face. It was definitely her.

The second thing to happen was that the small hand in question, which still rested on the Berserker Gate, began to crab spasmodically toward the handprint, feeling its way with fingertips.

Opal pulled back Holly's hood to take a better look and saw that the face crackled a little on close inspection.

A mask. A child's projection mask. Like the one used by Pip...

"No!" she screamed. "No, I will not permit it!"

She reached under Holly's chin and wrenched off the mask, and of course it was not Holly underneath.

Opal saw her own cloned face beneath the mask, and she felt instantly traumatized, as though blindsided by a massive blow.

"It is me!" she breathed, then giggled hysterically. "And only I can close the gate."

Two seconds of stunned inaction followed from Opal, which allowed Nopal's fingers to arrange themselves perfectly in the handprint. The print turned green and radiated a warm light. The smell of summer emanated from the stone, and there was birdsong.

Artemis chuckled, showing his blood-rimmed teeth. "I would imagine that you're *vexed* now."

Opal sent a vicious magical pulse directly into the clone's torso, twisting her from Juliet's grip and sending her rolling away from the gate, but all she accomplished with her brutality was to let the ethereal light flood through faster. The emerald rays spiraled upward in a tight coil, then fanned out to form a hemisphere around the magic circle. The Berserkers sighed and bathed their upturned faces in the meadow-green glow.

"It is finally finished, Opal," said Artemis. "Your plan has failed. You are finished."

There were people in the light, smiling and beckoning. There were scenes from times gone by. Fairies farming in this very valley.

Opal did not give up so easily and recovered herself. "No. I still have power. Perhaps I lose these Berserker fools, but my magic will protect me. There are other fairies to be duped, and the next time you will not stop me."

Opal slapped Oro hard to distract him from the light. "Make certain that clone is dead," she ordered. "The magic may not take the soulless creature. Finish her off if need be. Do it now!"

Oro frowned. "But she is one of us."

"What do I care?"

“But it is over, Majesty. We are leaving.”

“Do as I say, thrall. It can be your last act before you ascend. Then I am done with you.”

“She is innocent. A helpless pixie.”

Opal was enraged by the argument. “Innocent? What do I care about that? I have killed a thousand innocent fairies, and I will kill ten times that if I deem it necessary. Do as I command.”

Oro drew the dagger, which seemed as big as a sword in his hand. “No, Opal. Bruin released me from my bonds. You shall kill no more fairies.”

And with a soldier’s efficiency he pierced Opal’s heart with a single thrust. The tiny pixie dropped, still speaking. She talked until her brain died, mouthing foul vitriol, still refusing to believe that it was over for her. She died staring into Artemis’s face, hating him.

Artemis wanted to hate right back, but all he could feel was sadness for the waste of life.

Something that may have been a spirit, or a dark twisted shadow, flickered behind Opal for a moment like a fleeing thief, then dissolved in the magical light.

All this time. All this strife and nobody wins. What a tragedy.

The light glowed brighter and shards detached themselves from the corona to become liquid, congealing around the Berserkers inside the circle. Some left their bodies easily, as though slipping from an old coat; others were yanked out limb by limb, jerking into the sky. Oro dropped his dagger, disgusted by what had been necessary, then vacated Beckett’s body in a flash of green fire.

At last, he may have said, though Artemis could not be sure. On either side of him, the clay warriors disintegrated as the Berserker spirits vacated them, and Artemis dropped to the ground, coming face to face with Nopal.

The clone lay with her eyes uncharacteristically bright and what might have been a smile on her face. She seemed to focus on Artemis for a moment, then the light died in her eyes and she was gone. She was peaceful at the end and, unlike the other fairies, no soul detached itself from her body.

You were never meant to be, realized Artemis, and then his thoughts turned to his own safety.

I need to escape the magic as quickly as possible.

The odds were in his favor, he knew, but that was no guarantee. He had survived against all odds so many times over the past few years that he knew that sometimes percentages counted for nothing.

It occurred to Artemis that, as a human, he should simply be able to hurl himself through the walls of this magical hemisphere and survive.

With all the genius in my head, I am to be saved by a simple high jump.

He scrambled to his feet and ran toward the edge of the gate tower. It was no more than ten feet. Difficult, but not impossible from a height.

What I wouldn't give for a set of Foaly's hummingbird wings now, he thought.

Through the green liquid Artemis saw Holly and Butler cresting the hill, running toward the crater.

Stay back, my friends, he thought. I am coming.

And he jumped for his life. Artemis was glad that Butler was there to witness his effort, as it was almost athletic. From this height, Artemis felt as though he were flying.

There was Holly racing down the slope, outrunning Butler for once. Artemis could see by the shape of her mouth that she was shouting his name.

His hands reached the skin of the magic bubble and passed through, and Artemis felt tremendous relief.

It worked. Everything will be different now. A new world with humans and fairies living together. I could be an ambassador.

Then the spell caught him as neatly as a bug in a jar, and Artemis slid down the inside of the magical corona as though it were made of glass.

Holly rushed down the hillside, reaching toward the magical light.

"Stay back!" Artemis shouted, and his voice was slightly out of synch with his lips. "The spell will kill you."

Holly did not slow, and Artemis could see that she intended to attempt a rescue.

She does not understand, he thought.

"Butler!" he called. "Stop her."

The bodyguard reached out his massive arms and folded Holly in a bear

hug. She used every escape maneuver in the manual, but there was no slipping such a grip.

“Butler, please. This is not right. It was supposed to be me.”

“Wait,” said Butler. “Just wait, Holly. Artemis has a plan.” He squinted through the green dome. “What is your plan, Artemis?”

All Artemis could do was smile and shrug.

Holly stopped struggling. “The magic shouldn’t affect a human, Artemis. Why hasn’t it released you yet?”

Artemis felt the magic scanning his person, looking for something. It found that something in his eye socket.

“I have a fairy eye—one of yours, remember?” said Artemis, pointing to the brown iris. “I thought my human genes could overcome that, but this is perceptive magic. Smart power.”

“I’ll get the defibrillator,” said Butler. “Perhaps there will be a spark left.”

“No,” said Artemis. “It will be too late.”

Holly’s eyes were slits now, and a pallor spread across her skin like white paint. She felt sick and broken.

“You knew. Why, Artemis? Why did you do this?”

Artemis did not answer this question. Holly knew him well enough by now to unravel his motives later. He had seconds left, and there were more urgent things to be said.

“Butler, you did not fail me. I tricked you. After all, I am a tactical genius and you were unconscious. I want you to remember that, just in case...”

“Just in case of what?” Butler shouted through the viscous light.

Again, Artemis did not answer the question. One way or another, Butler would find out.

“Do you remember what I said to you?” said Artemis, touching his own forehead.

“I remember,” said Holly. “But...”

There was no more time for questions. The green mist was sucked backward into the Berserker Gate as though drawn by a vacuum. For a

moment Artemis was left standing, unharmed, and Butler dropped Holly to rush to his charge's side. Then Artemis's fairy eye glowed green, and by the time Butler caught the falling boy in his arms, Artemis Fowl's body was already dead.

Holly dropped to her knees and saw Opal Koboi's twisted body by the lock. The remnants of black magic had eaten through her skin in several places, exposing the ivory gleam of skull.

The sight affected her not one bit at that moment, though the pixie's staring eyes would haunt Holly's dreams for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 19

THE ROSES

Six Months Later

The world was resilient and so slowly fixed itself. Once the initial thunder strike of devastation had passed, there was a wave of opportunism as a certain type of people, that is, the majority, tried to take advantage of what had happened.

People who had been sneered at as New Age ecohippies were now hailed as saviors of humanity, as it dawned on people that their traditional methods of hunting and farming could keep families fed through the winter. Faith healers, evangelists, and witch doctors shook their fists around campfires and their following blossomed.

A million and one other things happened that would change the way humanity lived on the earth, but possibly the two most important events following the Great Techno-Crash were the realization that things could be fixed, and the detection of fairies.

After the initial months of panic, a Green Lantern fanatic in Sydney got the Internet up and going again, discovering that even though most of the parts in his antenna had exploded, he still knew how to fix it. Slowly the modern age began to reassert itself, as cell phone networks were rigged by amateurs and kids took over the TV stations. Radio made a huge comeback, and some of the old velvet-voiced guys from the seventies were wheeled out of retirement to slot actual CDs into disk drives. Water became the new gold, and oil dropped to third on the fuel list after solar and wind.

Across the globe there had been hundreds of sightings of strange creatures who might have been fairies or aliens. One moment these creatures were not there, and the next there was a crackle or a bang and suddenly there

were observation posts with little people in them, all over the world. Small flying craft fell from the sky, and powerless submarines bobbed to the surface offshore of a hundred major cities.

The trouble was that all of the machinery self-destructed, and any of the fairies/aliens taken into custody inexplicably vanished in the following weeks. Humanity knew that it was not alone on the planet, but it didn't know where to find these strange creatures. And considering mankind had not even managed to explore the planet's oceans, it would be several hundred years before they developed the capacity to probe beneath the earth's crust.

So the stories were exaggerated until nobody believed them anymore, and the one video that did survive was not half as convincing as any Saturday morning kids' show.

People knew what they had seen, and those people would believe it to the day they died; but soon psychiatrists began to assign the fairy sightings to the mass traumatic hallucination scrapheap that was already piled high with dinosaurs, superheroes, and Loch Ness monsters.

The Fowl Estate

Ireland became truly an island once more. Communities retreated into themselves and began growing foodstuffs that they would actually eat rather than mechanically suck all the goodness out of, freeze all the additives into, and ship off to other continents. Many wealthy landowners voluntarily donated their idle fields to disgruntled hungry people with sharp implements.

Artemis's parents had managed to make their way home from London, where they had been when the world broke down, and, shortly after the funeral ceremony for Artemis, the Fowl Estate was converted into over five hundred separate plots where people could grow whatever fruit and vegetables the Irish climate permitted.

The ceremony itself was simple and private, with only the Fowl and Butler families present. Artemis's body was buried on the high meadow where he had spent so much of his time tinkering on his solar plane. Butler did not attend, because he steadfastly refused to believe the evidence presented to him by his own eyes.

Artemis is not gone, he asserted, time after time. This is not the endgame.

He would not be persuaded otherwise, no matter how many times Juliet or Angeline Fowl dropped down to his dojo for a talk.

Which was why the bodyguard showed not one whit of surprise when Captain Holly Short appeared at the door of his lodge at dawn one morning.

“Well, it’s about time,” he said, grabbing his jacket from the coatrack. “Artemis leaves instructions, and it takes you guys half a year to figure them out.”

Holly hurried after him. “Artemis’s instructions were not exactly simple to follow. And, typically, they were totally illegal.”

In the courtyard, a doorway had been cut into the orange glow of the morning sky, and in that doorway stood Foaly, looking decidedly nervous.

“Which do you think seems less suspicious?” asked Butler. “An alien-looking craft hovering in the yard of a country home, or a floating doorway with a centaur standing in it?”

Foaly clopped down the gangplank, towing a hover trolley behind him. The shuttle door closed and fizzled out of the visible spectrum.

“Can we get on with this, please?” he wondered. “Everything we’re doing here is against fairy law and possibly immoral. Caballine thinks I’m at Mulch’s ceremony. The Council is actually giving him a medal. I hate lying to my wife. If I stop to think about this for more than ten seconds, I might just change my mind.”

Holly took control of the hover trolley. “You will not change your mind. We have come too far just to go home without a result.”

“Hey,” said Foaly. “I was just saying.”

Holly’s eyes were hard with a determination that would tolerate no argument. She had been wearing that expression every day now for six months, ever since she had returned home from the Berserker Gate incident. The first thing she had done was seek out Foaly in Police Plaza.

I have a message for you from Artemis, she’d said, once Foaly had released her from a smothering hug.

Really? What did he say?

He said something about a chrysalis. You were to power it up.

These words had a powerful effect on the centaur. He trotted to the door and locked it behind Holly. Then he ran a bug sweep with a wand he kept on

his person.

Holly knew then that the word meant something to her friend.

What chrysalis, Foaly? And why is Artemis so interested in it?

Foaly took Holly's shoulders and placed her in a lab chair. *Why is Artemis interested? Our friend is dead, Holly. Maybe we should let him go?*

Holly pushed Foaly away and jumped to her feet. *Let him go? Artemis didn't let me go in Limbo. He didn't let Butler go in London. He didn't let the entire city of Haven go during the goblin revolution. Now tell me, what is this chrysalis?*

So Foaly told her, and the bones of Artemis's idea became obvious, but more information was needed.

Was there anything else? asked the centaur. *Did Artemis say or do anything else?*

Holly shook her head miserably. *No. He got a little sentimental, which is unusual for him, but understandable. He told me to kiss you.*

She stood on tiptoes and kissed Foaly's forehead. "Just in case, I suppose."

Foaly was suddenly upset, and almost overwhelmed, but he coughed and swallowed it down for another time.

He said, Kiss Foaly. Those exact words?

No, said Holly, thinking back. *He kissed me, and said, Give him that from me.*

The centaur grinned, then cackled, then dragged her across the lab.

We need to get your forehead under an electron microscope, he said.

Holly explained their interpretation of Artemis's plan to Butler as they walked toward the Berserker Gate. Foaly trotted ahead, muttering calculations to himself and keeping an eye out for early-bird humans.

"The chrysalis was what Opal used to grow a clone of herself. It was turned over to Foaly, who was supposed to destroy it."

"But he didn't," guessed Butler.

"No. And Artemis knew that from hacking into LEP recycling records."

"So, Artemis wanted Foaly to grow a clone? Even an old soldier like me

knows that you need DNA for that..."

Holly tapped her forehead. "That's why he kissed me. There was enough DNA in the saliva for Foaly to grow an army, but it seemed like a natural trace to the airport scanners."

"A genius to the end," said Butler. He frowned. "But aren't clones poor, dumb creatures? Nopal could barely stay alive."

Foaly stopped at the lip of the crater to explain. "Yes, they are, because they don't have a soul. This is where the magic comes in. When the first Berserker lock was closed, all fairy spirits within the magic circle were released from their bodies, but Artemis may have had enough human in him, and enough sheer willpower, to remain in this realm, even after his physical body died. His spirit could be a free-floating, ectoplasmic, ethereal organism right now."

Butler almost stumbled over his own feet. "Are you saying Artemis is a ghost?" He turned to Holly for a straight answer. "Is he actually saying that Artemis is a ghost?"

Holly steered the hover trolley down the incline. "The Berserkers were ghosts for ten thousand years. That's how the spell worked. If they lasted that long, it's possible that Artemis held on for six months."

"Possible?" said Butler. "That's all we've got?"

Foaly pointed to a spot near the tower. "*Possible* is being optimistic. I would say *barely conceivable* would be a better bet."

Holly undid the clips of a refrigerated container on top of the hover trolley. "Yes, well the *barely conceivable* is Artemis Fowl's specialty."

Butler heaved off the lid, and what he saw inside took his breath away, even though he had been expecting it. Artemis's clone lay inside a transparent tent, breath fogging the plastic.

"Artemis," he said. "It's him exactly."

"I had to play with the hothousing," said Foaly, unhooking the clone from its life support systems. "And I didn't have access to my own lab, so he has six toes on his left foot now, but it's close enough for a backstreet job. I never thought I'd say it, but Opal Koboï made good tech."

"It's...He's fifteen now, right?"

Foaly ducked behind a twist of nutrient pipes to hide his face. "Actually,

the timing got away from me a little, so he's a little older. But don't worry, I gave him a total makeover. Skin shrink, bone scrape, marrow injections—I even lubed his brain. Believe me, his own mother wouldn't be able to tell the difference.”

He rubbed his hands and changed the subject. “Now, to work. Show me where Artemis died.”

“Down there,” said Holly, pointing. “By the...”

She had been about to say *tower*, but her breath caught in her throat at the sight of the incredible roses that grew in thick curved bands, emanating from the exact point where Artemis had collapsed.

The Fowl Estate roses were something of a sensation, blooming as they did in a perfect spiral at the foot of the round tower, where no roses had been planted. Their unusual burnished orange petals made them visible from the other garden plots, and Juliet had been assigned the task of ensuring that none of the villagers helped themselves to as much as a single stem.

Because of recent little people rumors, the garden workers had taken to calling the flowers *fairy roses*, which was a better name for them than even they suspected.

Butler carried the enclosed clone in his arms, and he was suddenly reminded of a night years ago when he had carried someone else through a field, watching the tall grass swish in Artemis's wake.

Except, that time I was carrying Holly.

Foaly interrupted his thought. “Butler, you must place the body in the roses. At the center of the spiral. Without life support we only have minutes before degeneration begins.”

Butler laid the clone gently inside the spiral, on a soft patch where there were no thorns to pierce it.

Holly knelt to open the tent's zipper. She pulled the flaps apart, and inside lay Artemis's new body in a hospital gown, its breath coming in short gasps, sweat sheening its forehead.

Foaly moved quickly around the clone, straightening its limbs, tilting its head back to clear the airways.

“These roses,” he said, “they are a sign. There's magical residue here. I would bet this formation is pretty much the same shape as Bruin Fadda's

original rune.”

“You’re pinning your hopes on a flowerbed sprouting in the meadow?”

“No, of course not, Butler. Bruin Fadda’s magic was powerful, and someone with Artemis’s willpower could easily last a few months.”

Butler held his own skull. “What if this doesn’t work, Holly? What if I let Artemis die?”

Holly turned quickly and saw that Butler was emotionally stretched. He had been hiding behind denial for half a year and would blame himself forever if Artemis didn’t come back.

If this does not work, Butler may never recover, she realized.

“It *will* work!” she said. “Now, less talk and more resurrecting. How long do we have, Foaly?”

“The clone can survive for perhaps fifteen minutes away from the life support.”

Butler knew that the time for objections was past. He would do whatever was necessary to give this plan a chance to succeed.

“Very well, Holly,” he said, standing to attention. “What should I do?”

Holly squatted three feet from the clone, fingers wrapped around rose stems, oblivious to the thorns piercing her skin. “It is all done now. Either he appears, or we have lost him forever.”

I think we will have lost something of ourselves, too, thought Butler.

They waited, and nothing out of the ordinary happened. Birds sang, the hedgerow bustled, and the sound of a tractor engine drifted to them across the fields. Holly squatted and fretted, dragging flowers out by their roots. While she worried, Butler’s gaze rested on the clone’s face and he recalled times past spent with his principal.

There never was anyone like Artemis Fowl, he thought. Though he didn’t make my job any easier with all his shenanigans. Butler smiled. Artemis always had my back, even though he could barely reach it.

“Holly,” he said, gently. “He’s not coming...”

Then the wind changed, and suddenly Butler could smell the roses. Holly stumbled forward to her feet.

“Something’s happening. I think something is happening.”

The breeze scooped a few rose petals from the flowers and sent them spinning skyward. More and more petals broke free as the wind seemed to curve along the orange spiral, quickly stripping each flower. The petals rose like butterflies, flitting and shimmering, filling the sky, blocking the sun.

“Artemis!” Butler called. “Come to my voice.”

Has he done it? Is this Artemis Fowl’s greatest moment?

The petals swirled with a noise like a chorus of sighs and then suddenly dropped like stones. The clone had not moved.

Holly moved forward slowly, as though learning to use her legs, then dropped to her knees, clasping the clone’s hand.

“Artemis,” she said, the word like a prayer. “Artemis, please.”

Still nothing. Not even breath now.

Butler had no time for his usual impeccable manners and moved Holly aside. “Sorry, Captain. This is my area of expertise.”

He knelt over the pale clone and, with his palm, searched for a heartbeat. There was none.

Butler tilted the clone’s head back, pinched its nose, and breathed life deep into its lungs.

He felt a weak heartbeat under his hand.

Butler fell backward. “Holly. I think...I think it worked.”

Holly crawled through the carpet of petals.

“Artemis,” she said urgently. “Artemis, come back to us.”

Two more breaths passed, then several rapid jerky ones, then Artemis’s eyes opened. Both a startling blue. The eyes were initially wide with shock, then fluttered like the wings of a jarred moth.

“Be calm,” said Holly. “You are safe now.”

Artemis frowned, trying to focus. It was clear that his faculties had not totally returned, and he did not yet remember the people leaning over him.

“Stay back,” he said. “You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

Holly took his hand. “We do know you, Artemis. And you know us. Try to remember.”

Artemis did try, concentrating until some of the clouds lifted.

“Y...you,” he said hesitantly. “You are my friends?”

Holly wept with sheer relief. “Yes,” she said. “We are your friends. Now we need to get you inside, before the locals arrive and see the recently deceased heir being escorted by fairies.”

Butler helped Artemis to his feet, on which he was obviously unsteady.

“Oh, go on, then,” said Foaly, offering his broad back. “Just this once.”

Butler lifted Artemis onto the centaur’s back and steadied him with a huge hand.

“You had me worried, Arty,” he said. “And your parents are devastated. Wait until they see you.”

As they walked across the fields, Holly pointed out areas of shared experience, hoping to jog the teen’s memory.

“Tell me,” Artemis said, his voice still weak. “How do I know you?”

And so Holly began her story: “It all started in Ho Chi Minh City one summer. It was sweltering by anyone’s standards. Needless to say, Artemis Fowl would not have been willing to put up with such discomfort if something extremely important had not been at stake. Important to the plan. ...”